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Debashish Banerji *Editor*

Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century

Theoretical Renewals

Springer

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Volume 7

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Chapter 1
Introduction—Theory and the Performative Politics of Punctuation

Debashish Banerji

Abstract This essay introduces the intent, scope, and other essays of the anthology. It engages with the question of the significance of Rabindranath Tagore in our times, both in the milieu of his birth, Bengal, and in the world. Significance here refers also to both senses of the operation of Rabindranath Tagore as a sign or "author function" in the milieus of his reception and as a subjectivity which escapes definition, yet renews itself through a politics of punctuation. It is in these senses that the introduction explicates the volume's choices of essays to tap into the unexpressed fertility of Tagore's texts, rescuing them from museological obsolescence and making them live as part of the performative politics of our times.

Keywords Theory · Tagore · Cultural politics · Humanism · Posthumanism · Civilization studies

Nobel awardee of 1913 for literature, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) has been celebrated in his native Bengal and in India as a larger than life icon whose songs presently make up the national anthems of two nations. Poet, novelist, short story writer, playwright, writer of dance dramas, song writer and composer, artist, nationalist, internationalist, educator, and social thinker, Tagore enjoyed a legendary reputation in his time and in the twentieth century. But public opinion on Tagore has grown more complex since his passing, with both sharply critical voices that have sought distance or a space of emergence from under his shadow and the fossilization of adulatory phrases or images which have stereotyped him into obsolescence. New national and global concerns have emerged since his lifetime which seek solutions based on a context of thinking that has developed its own categories and constellations. One hundred and fifty years since his birth, does Tagore have any relevance to this postmodern and post-colonial discourse?

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Or does he belong merely to a moment in history, exalted by his hour into a prophet mouthing “guru English” in a humanist canon, fated to be a fossilized relic in an archive of cultural rituals or a simulacrum in anachronistic identity politics? “Punctuated Renewals” is an attempt to approach this question in our present time and age, using contemporary theoretical tools.

A contemporary recontextualization of Tagore within the international canon of critical modernism from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century would attempt to recover the trajectories of relevance linking his historicity to ours. In retrospect, post-coloniality is seen to be imbricated in postmodernity but not coincident with it. Yet modernism as a cultural response to the episteme of post-Enlightenment modernity fashioned much of its ammunition from an anti-colonial periphery, just as primary strands of anti-colonial resistance sought support in the ideals of the Enlightenment, including its practice of revisionary self-critique. As the twenty-first century draws us into an increasingly interdependent age, perhaps a new history of exchanges and negotiations is in the making, a vision of nomadic affective communities working toward a new homecoming. An agent circulating within such transnational webs, Tagore embodies an internal dialog of local, regional, national, and international concerns of cultures and their histories and the fashioning of new ethics and aesthetics, of subjects, subjectivities, and subjections, of lived and imagined communities, of identities and representations, and of the other, who is excluded or marginalized from representation and the yet other, who escapes or refuses representation.

An index of his significance may be seen in the aporia surrounding the two major representations through which he comes to the public mind of our times—a dimly remembered Orientalist sage or prophet in a sepia-colored page from the album of early twentieth century Nobel awardees; and a hugely adulated divine icon whose portrait continues to be endlessly reproduced and whose songs are incessantly played and learnt in almost every Bengali home. The first of these comprises the global reputation of Tagore, which rose and fell on the wave of his own English translation of Gitanjali, couched in a sonorous idiom that the Anglophone modernist tradition has long distanced itself from. Translations, as Radha Chakravarty’s chapter in this volume makes clear, can always be considered unfavorably, as more or less bad copies of an “original,” yet they have a life of their own, unfurling their nuances differently in different minds. Anglophone modernist poetics, masterminded by the likes of Eliot, Pound, and the later Yeats, sought a closer earthly grasp, the concreteness of the empirical image, which could fuse meaning, fantasy, and critique seamlessly. In the wake of this new poetics, the sentimentality or musicality without substance of Victorian versifiers evaporated quickly as in waking from a distasteful dream. Tagore’s translations have suffered the inevitable consequence of this revolution in taste. And yet it would be a mistake to think of this relegation to the margins of Anglophone taste as an extinguishment. American sensibilities, following Whitman and the Beats, have kept alive an ear for large cosmic themes and rhythms, and Tagore continues to be appreciated in translation among readers of poetry in North America. This is even more so the case in Latin America and the European continent, where translations

twice removed from the original or alien cultural resonances of the English have unfolded the Tagorean text in appreciable ways.

In his native Bengal, Tagore remains immortal, a phenomenon of divinity and enduring superstar magnitude far beyond possible critical acclaim, the very opposite of the peripheral significance of his global image. Apart from the simulacrum put to use in regional or national identity politics, this tells us of the cultural history of Bengal and the invocative and evocative powers of Tagore's texts within that intersubjective matrix of affect and meaning. Tagore's contribution to the modern Bengali language remains close to originary and is, in fact, intimately linked to his international persona. The rise of Bengali as a modern regional vernacular in the nineteenth century is itself a powerful act of collective translation between two cultures, colonized and colonizer, so as to append to the first the nuances and historical resources of the second, all the better to respond to its civilizational challenge. Such an effort involves a two-way hermeneutics, a bringing into presence of the regional and national past, as well as the trajectories of modernity, a discourse with its own complexities and internal differences, and the ability to sound each against the other. Of all the contributors to this shaping of a language as the vehicle of a dynamic participatory alternate modernity, Tagore's textual interventions may be easily considered primary, an infusion of fire and matter that continues to be reworked and is hardly exhausted. Thus, though Tagore's overabundant fertility and excess could have been spoken of in his own time in terms of concerns present to its theoretical corpus, the unspoken and the unthought continue to haunt his text and our aim in this volume has been to open a space for the living power of his critique and his creative innovations to fertilize our present engagements through theoretical visibility.

As Gilles Deleuze says, it is the singularity of the individual that precedes the species. So it is that the singularity of literature precedes language. Language comes to recognize its parts, its sinews, its sensations, its affections, and its cognitive categories only through literature. For Bengali as a language aspiring to embody a distinct modern subjectivity, Tagore, with his superhuman output in every genre—over one thousand poems; two thousand songs; eight volumes of short stories; two dozen plays; eight novels; and many books and essays on philosophy, religion, education, and social topics—stands out as an avatar of literature, whose texts fill out its subjective possibilities and overflow into the performative text of his lived experience. Irrespective of their qualitative difference, all of these must be taken integrally, each illuminating and being illuminated by all the others. Thus, we find that whether through affective invocations to nature, man, woman, or God, or critical responses to the problems of modernity or nation, the psychodrama of social archetypes, or the participative text of the educational and creative community of Shantiniketan, Tagore prepares a universal and integral humanism, preserving the marks of singularity yet reaching beyond the human.

This open question of the human, with its precedents and antecedents, saturates the Tagorean text, and grants to it its location in modernity and contemporaneity. As brought out by Amit Chaudhuri in his essay here, what Tagore achieved, against the grain of condescending marginalization, was a transformation of Orientalism

through an appropriation of humanism. Yet Tagore's critical humanism, rooted in a pre-Enlightenment Indian canon, included properties which exceeded the human, both laterally (cosmic inclusion) and vertically (transcendence). If it is for his universal humanism that Tagore was known in the modernist era, a more substantial Tagore comes to sight across the divide initiated by Martin Heidegger in proclaiming himself an anti-humanist. This postmodern slogan, echoed by Foucault who foresaw the approaching erasure of the image of man in the sands of time, can be traced to Nietzsche's definition of the human as a transitional being, "a rope thrown between the beast and the overman." Attentive to the empirical reality of humanity and the modern ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, Tagore nevertheless refused any bounded essence for the human. Drawing on Upanishadic intuitions, his thinking of the human privileged becoming, thus converging with the open horizon of phenomenology and existentialism, and crossing the humanist/anti-humanist divide. In repeated essays in this volume, we find a Tagore who, while including the freedom, justice, and poetry of the human, reached for identity beyond the human, a becoming-other, through affective empathy, an identification with existences beyond boundaries.

Yet such a becoming is not a mysticism which seeks its fulfillment in historical isolation in Tagore; its contemporaneity lies in his thinking through the possibilities of self-exceeding as a human problematic at our peculiar cusp of world history. The formation of this overman (*visva manav*) is folded into the problem of pedagogy and the making of the national child-subject as shown by Satadru Sen and Nita Kumar; it pursues transnational networks of affective communities in seeking a plural cosmopolitanism, as brought out by Sachidananda Mohanty and Partha Mitter; and it forms the cornerstone of an alternative understanding of world literature, as in the essay by Makarand Paranjape. It is not absent either from that most essential domain of literature and the one for which Tagore is best known—poetry. The postmodern imaginary is shot through with the reach for the utopian subject, the one who has access to a "language within language" or an "unthought within thought." Language is the house of Being, Heidegger said, looking to poeisis for the disclosure of the Zeitgeist, and a parallel sagacity from India, Sri Aurobindo, sought to articulate his own overman-making project in terms of a redefinition of "mantra" seen as "the future poetry." This is not the transcendental silence of the mystic but a ubiquity of signification, a gift of tongues at the threshold of the human unconscious of language. It is this "rustle of language" at the borders blurring nature and culture at one end, man and overman at the other, that Rosinka Chaudhuri finds in the poetry of Tagore, and Saranindranath Tagore pursues beyond signification into an experience of non-duality in Tagore's "late style."

Yet the plunge into language is also the plunge into politics, both the transnational politics of ideologies and the micropolitics of subjectivation. Living through and participating in the emergence of new imagined identities, the regional, the national, the pan-continental, and the global, Tagore always sought to ground this difficult politics of becoming in habitus, whether the local intersubjective milieu of Jorasanko or the creative world community of Shantiniketan. In this process,

the seeking for autonomy runs counter to the orders of empire operating at all levels and attempting to co-opt agency whether through objective forms such as imperial/cultural colonization, statist or corporate administration, social or familial patriarchy, or forms of subjective conditioning through the mediative technologies of imagination. To read Tagore's text theoretically today is to parse the codes of resistance to or emancipation from such orders which underlie his own strategic use of media, whether verbal, visual, aural, or kinesthetic. My own essay on intersubjectivity and the language of portraits, Esha De's study of feminism in Tagore's dance dramas and Saurav Dasthakur's contemplation on the hybrid construction and dissemination of *Rabindrasangeet* elaborate on the visual and aural politics of this open dialectic; while Sumanyu Satpathy's exploration of the queer potential of Tagore's creative misreadings of the classical canon reveals the aporetic fertility of his texts.

Close to the mystery at the heart of the "rustle of language" lies the issue of translation. The singularity and excess of literature escapes reproduction and mutates with language use. In fact, perhaps, the single greatest factor in the huge difference in reception between Tagore's corpus inside and outside Bengal today can be attributed to translation and it is translation again on which his continued relevance depends. Radha Chakravarty's chapter on translating Tagore in our times reflects deeply on this issue. As discussed, Tagore's own translations into English and those of his work by others in his time have largely fallen out of favor in the Anglophone mind due to changes in critical taste. There is also the problem of the falsification of "originals," an anxiety endemic to translation and something which continually haunted Tagore. But this derivative understanding of translation has been challenged, and Chakravarty, among the outstanding translators of our time, affirms this in her chapter, pointing to translation as interpretation and hence an original with its own singularity. Enlivening a text within one's own space and time, translation also strategically exploits the resources of the host language, bringing new experiences to it, while being fully aware of the practice as performative politics. In this sense, the enterprise of translation can be thought of as coincident with that of the present project, a punctuated renewal, both in the sense of a punctuation or nuance interrupting the continuing reception of the text and in terms of new inflections in its articulation, voicing its contemporaneity. With the lapse of the copyright on Tagore's texts, a variety of new translations of Tagore are appearing in English and other languages, providing new vehicles for a pluralistic rebirth of Tagore in our times.

Critical perspectives on forms of imperial power have developed a much clearer articulation since the 1990s, but some key post-structuralist texts of the late 1960s and 1970s have formed the backbone of this discourse. Principally, one may think of Michel Foucault's studies in the archeology and genealogy of power in establishing orders of truth; and in the wake of these studies, Edward Said's 1978 text *Orientalism*, which demonstrated the complicity of Western political power, knowledge acquisition and subjective imagination in subjugating the non-Western world in the era of colonization and beyond. Since then, post-colonial scholarship has grappled with non-Western responses to imperialism, colonialism, and/or the

liberal humanism of post-Enlightenment modernity, viewing them in terms of their derivative status or subversive hybridity or indigenous difference. The Subaltern Studies collective is well known as an important group of scholars opening up these approaches since the 1980s. The essays in this volume ask similar questions of Tagore's text, but whereas the teleology or trajectory of post-Enlightenment modernity is contested or rejected wholesale by the majority of earlier post-colonial scholars, many of the writers in this volume find Rabindranath as someone who accepts what he sees as the telos of the Enlightenment toward the fashioning of a better world of universal freedom and creativity. While such a telos is centered for him in the autonomy of the individual, it looks to the cultural history of India for resources that can be brought into engagement toward this universality, so as to avoid the leaching of subjectivity through the ubiquitous action of capital's instrumental logic, to protect singularity and to ground becoming in local habitus. However, it is not therefore essentialistic; it engages cultures in a mutually transformative dialectic, struggling against phallogocentric appropriations, whether based in tradition or modernity. It also, as mentioned above, redefines humanism, including within it resources for self-exceeding and becoming-other, border-crossings in kinship with the non-human, that can bring such identities within its own expanding sphere of freedom and responsibility.

In Amit Chaudhuri's essay, for example, Tagore draws attention to Goethe and the English Romantic poets for their power of language in shaping a new vision of human emancipation, through communion and identity with nature. He opposes this ideal to the drive to dominate and exploit nature, the rapacious hunger of capital, thus participating in the ongoing revisionary enterprise within the discourse of post-Enlightenment modernity. But such participation is undertaken by Tagore from an Indian cultural vantage, not seen as an alien or exclusionary insertion but a transcultural contribution forming part of the hybrid inception and continuance of the Enlightenment. According to Chaudhuri, this wresting of cultural agency is achieved by Tagore by demonstrating the profound molding influence of Kalidasa on Goethe and through him on the English Romantics and then by linking Kalidasa's remarkable concrete visionary and sensuous style to his own, thus establishing the arche-poet of Indian classicism as a proto-modern. Here, we find that while Tagore's alignment with liberal humanism furthers and revises the discourse of post-Enlightenment modernity, it stretches the boundaries of the human toward a panpsychism or a panentheism. This opens up the postmodern potential of Tagore, moving toward the cosmic through an intense intimacy with nature.

Makarand Paranjape's essay overlaps in significant ways with Amit Chaudhuri's. Paranjape also references Tagore's invocation of Kalidasa and his influence on Goethe, but here in the context of establishing the boundaries, scope and purpose of the modern discipline of Comparative Literature in the emerging field of Indian national education. Paranjape focuses on a talk Tagore was invited to give in 1907 to the newly established National Council of Education in Calcutta. Though the talk was to be on Comparative Literature, Tagore declared that he had chosen to speak on World Literature. The modern academy forms arguably the central normative institutional pillar in the Enlightenment's world

spanning systemic spread, its disciplines geared toward establishing the locus of the human as the "measure of all things" and his civilizational telos. Here, Comparative Literature, like all other comparative humanistic disciplines, can be seen as a museological enterprise, ordering cultures through classifications and comparisons into center and peripheries, as part of its disciplinary order. Instead of engaging with this discipline, to contest its schema or to seek a more prominent representation within it, Paranjape points out how Tagore relates the purpose of such a study not to the ordering of some archive, but to the emancipation of the human through the formation of creative global subjectivities. World literature then becomes a field of transcultural exchanges, a history of give and take and of the expansion of the human spirit in individuals. Once again, we see Tagore undertaking a revision in the destining of the Enlightenment by enabling and pushing beyond its humanism toward the overman-making project of singular global subjectivities.

Sachidananda Mohanty's intervention in a post-Saidean vein cleaves surprisingly close to the open-ended and transformative cultural dialog seen as a revisionary furtherance of Enlightenment humanism in Chaudhuri's and Paranjape's essays. Following on Leela Gandhi's work on affective communities of the early twentieth century, Mohanty traces a transnational web of cultural voyages in a creative participation of cultures leading toward a global civilizational becoming. He also shows how these various participants attempted to ground their ideas in local experiments of intentional community. Again, such cosmopolitanism is not an exercise in the ordering of cultures or civilizations nor a denial of heterogeneous singularities; it is the expansion of singularities toward universality, the formation of global subjects rooted in cultural history.

Partha Mitter follows a similar trajectory in tracing a transnational web of art making, print journalism, and exhibitions in establishing early twentieth-century modernism in art. Here, while the canonical history of modernism is orchestrated through a Eurocentric narrative, Mitter illuminates a web of co-creative transactions in which artists, art critics, and travelers of the East, particularly of Bengal in India, played an important part. Tagore's travels, interactions, and paintings, the "last harvest" of his life, are shown to be part of this rich pictorial conversation, constituted by a subjective primitivism, mining the resources of the psychological unconscious in response to a global modernity's subjugation of the non-rational.

If poeisis with its aesthetically inflected Baudelairian intuition of cosmic correspondences at the threshold of human language and its invitation to a pluralistic global becoming formed the core of the Tagorean text, the ethics of the production of national and global subjects formed the bulk of his prose works and fused imperceptibly with the poetic in his performative creations. Though Tagore strongly espoused a surplus value theory of aesthetics, the excess of beauty over utility in a work, this seeming art for art's sake was never without its ethical dimension. Drawing on the cultural history of India, he affirmed an understanding of *dharma*, law, or righteousness, as *shreyas*, *mangalam*, and *kalyanam*, terms awkwardly rendered as "auspicious," which resist easy translation into English due to their cultural investment in an ontology of sensual harmonic exchanges

(*samjnana*). Other terms belonging to this ontological lineage intimate to Tagore include *lavanya*, *shri*, and *shivam* of the Vedic trio *satyam*, *shivam*, and *sundaram*, indistinguishably uniting truth, austerity, and beauty as a descriptor of reality. In this, Tagore's distaste for an austerity that maims harmonious flowering is evident, but he was equally conscious of the easy appropriation of aesthetics by the androcentric order and struggled against social odds to find a practical expression to the collective play of autonomous beauty beyond class, culture, and gender divides. Tagore's non-sectarian mysticism was built on the pillars of a subtle underlying unity of Being (brahman) and a Becoming in which conscious beings were agents who enabled or impeded a creative and affective dynamic realization of this unity (*lila*). If he imbibed his orientation to Being from his Vedantic Brahmo childhood, the affective choices which gave ethical and aesthetic meaning to life came for him from the regional Vaishnav tradition of Bengal, to which he added inflections from heterodox local and varied world traditions of mysticism. As mentioned earlier, such a mystical orientation was not for Tagore an other-worldly pursuit, but provided him with a vision and a framework for reading and interpreting the cosmic and social texts of being and becoming.

Thus, we find his novels and short stories, his plays and dance dramas, his critical essays on national and transnational civilizational matters, on society and culture, and on philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics, his tracts on education, and his children's literature, informed by the vision of a world of free exchanges based on openness to and delight in the simultaneous difference and oneness (*bhedabheda*) of beings and things. To arrive at a cosmopolitan and egalitarian world, free of biases and oppressions of race, ethnicity, class, or gender, in which such exchanges based on autonomy, singularity, and creativity become possible, constitutes the ethics of Tagore, an ethics whose activism is enacted not in the streets but in the hearts of humans, through the psychology and aesthetics of subject formation. In Patrick Hogan's essay on the proto-stories at work in the short stories and novels of Tagore, we find such a close analysis of the cultural psychology of affect through "attachment sensitivity" and "attachment openness" working within and across the boundaries of class and patriarchy in situations which thwart and maim or enable and amplify the joy of mutuality in human bonding and growth.

This practical hermeneutics of an affective intersubjectivity forms also the core of Tagore's thinking for the formation of national and transnational subjects of modernity. In this sense, the negotiations of cultural psychology can be seen as equally political, exchanges conducted across premodern–modern–postmodern, colonial–national, male–female, and elite–subaltern power boundaries. Satadru Sen's essay deals with Tagore's two autobiographical texts regarding his childhood as creative acts of re-membering the fragmented and remaindered regional/national/transnational child-subject. As part of Tagore's educational project, this critical importance given to the juvenile periphery is seen by Sen in terms of drawing the conditional framework needed for a strategic enablement of creativity as the basis of the national subject's responsible engagement with modernity from a vantage of freedom and joy. This implies not only new cultural resources of nature, environment, fantasy, and collective memory for the child, but also a new

patriarchy, a different dialectical relation between the governor and the governed, based on reason, eros and affect. Tagore's creative autobiography then becomes, like his educational environment at Shantiniketan, a didactic text for enabling a futuristic utopianism based on a sanctioned state of retreat from which to conduct a continuing creative negotiation between the premodern and the modern, ruptures in the cultural archive, territories lost and given, unstable virtualities, and habitual realities. Sen notes how through the privileging of Bengali Tagore envisages this process of subjectivation, undertaken with the primary instrument of the "mother tongue," as also a continuing creative refashioning of the lived regional/national cultural text, turning it into a vehicle for an alternative (post)modernity.

Nita Kumar's chapter, also dealing with Tagore's educational formation, ideas, and projects, overlaps in significant ways with Sen's. Kumar reiterates the educational value of Tagore's autobiographical childhood memoirs, but more as the record of a plural cultural pedagogy—formal and colonial, and multiple informal domestic streams of elite and subaltern native cultures. In this, Kumar points out that Tagore's education was not unique but represented the contribution of the home to the formation of the elite nationalist subject of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But, like Sen, Kumar also points out that in Tagore's case, the unconventional social status, freedom of impersonal patriarchal encouragement, and cultural exposure, along with formal discipline of varied kinds, provided the impetus to a rich and wide-ranging creative exploration of home and world, rooted in native culture and language. Kumar sees the replication of these conditions at an institutional level as the basis of Tagore's educational aims, a personal creative project with the production of creativity as its goal. Again, like Sen, Kumar notes the furtherance of the national/regional cultural text through the insistent privileging of mother tongue. However, though Kumar considers Tagore's ideas and personal practices inspirational and innovative, she also sees his implementation inadequate to institutional replication, due to his inability to methodize a pedagogy based on creative freedom in the practices of teachers and students. Still, his work in education opens up ideals for the future and experimental practices which Kumar herself and others continue to attempt to establish institutionally.

As with the imagining of childhood, Tagore's critical and creative texts engage extensively with the question of the space and subjectivity of woman in the nascent emerging nation. Here again, the post-Enlightenment ethos of human emancipation is brought to bear on the structures of female subjugation within entrenched hierarchic networks of patriarchy. However, the humanist ideals of autonomy are also subjected to critique, the rootlessness, isolation, vulnerability, and erasure of cultural histories implicit in progressivist modernity pitted against the richness of a cultural subjectivity, drawing from nature and a poetics of cosmic harmony. Particularly in his fictional works involving human relations—his novels, short stories, plays, and dance dramas—these negotiations between tradition and modernity centering on woman develop a complex and nuanced unsettled repertory in which characters and their choices circulate like a mnemonic deck with variant surprising results. Several contemporary critics, however, hold that in these works, Tagore's exploration of female autonomy is repeatedly

preempted through ultimate conservative enablements complicit with patriarchy. Esha Niyogi De, in her essay on female subjectivity in two of Tagore's dance dramas, *Chitrangada* and *Shyama*, disagrees with this reduction, holding instead that though such compromises may represent Tagore's aporetic situatedness and sometime pessimistic assessments of gendered power relations in Indian society, the radical possibilities of female emancipation in his texts should not be lost sight of. Thus, these fictional spaces seem to her as heterotopias in which an open dialectic is performed, exploring female desire and agency within the codes of empire. De points to the song-and-dance drama as another operation of Tagore's magical fertility with the language of the threshold, here the intertextuality of the lyric and the kinesthetic, opening up a hinterland of ambiguous suggestions and alternate trajectories. Within this, the subtle didactics of the Tagorean text emerge—the empowerment of an autonomous female subjectivity, the destructive effects of the androcentric drive to capture and control feminine essence, the virtue of creative affect in relations, the positive potential of same-sex reinforcements, and the participation of liberated heterosexual eros (the family-to-be) in a distributed constructive communitarian life (the national-society-to-come).

Sumanyu Satpathy's exploration of the same dance drama *Chitrangada*, dealt with by De, makes it the focus of contemporary queer appropriations of fertile fissures and aporia in Tagore's texts. After demonstrating a broader possibility of this kind, Satpathy hones in on recently deceased transgender filmmaker Rituparno Ghosh's 2012 adaptation of Chitrangada, which interweaves its sexual ambiguities with a queer framing narrative. Satpathy draws attention to deliberate creative mistranslations in Tagore's *Chitrangada* from the original Sanskrit text, which introduce possibilities of queer exploration, exploited in contemporary times by LGBT causes.

Monali Chatterjee's analysis of *Shesher Kobita (Farewell Song)* discloses a similar aporetic dynamic operating between patriarchal structures and female emancipation in the furtherance of gendered relations pertaining to the home and the world. The integration of cultural difference necessary to an alternative modernity is demonstrated here by Tagore in a female character of powerful intelligence and emotional maturity, but her relations with the male protagonist fail to traverse the spectrum from mental to material existence, revealing a chasm between native social reality and the demands of cosmopolitanism. The potential for emancipation and leadership of the national female subject is unable to realize itself in a nation-building project founded on conjugality and equal intimate partnership in an androcentric culture-resisting transformation. Yet, as in the case of Esha De's discussion of the later dance dramas, Chatterjee's analysis of *Shesher Kobita* opens up the vision of the full flowering of national female subjectivity as an utopian ideal for the future.

Though *Shesher Kobita* is set in the northeastern hill station of Shillong, this provides a background only to the lives of cosmopolitan and traditional Bengalis. We have seen earlier how Tagore brought together the regional, national, and transnational in exchanges conducive to the imagination of ideal national and global subjects of his time and of the future. Yet, in spite of his participation in

such affective multicultural webs, the political import of such exchanges was not lost on Tagore; he could not be blinded to the inequalities of the playing field. Member of a politically subject and culturally subordinated nation, while he sought franchise in modernity's self-determination, he also stood in solidarity against "the West's" self-identification as hegemonic civilization, through the horizontally hybrid strategic essentialism of a pan-Asian identity. This is what directed Tagore to other Asian lands and friendships, particularly in an "eastward" drift to Southeast Asian and East Asian cultures. Anuradha Ghosh explores an aspect of this eastward "routing" in which Tagore's creative imagination is "rooted." Instead of the continental discourse of the "distant" East, Ghosh chooses to look at the ways in which the internal peripheries of such an East—the northeast Indian hill states of Assam, Meghalaya, and Manipur—contributed to the national text of Tagore's intellection. Just as in his engagements with the nations of Southeast and East Asia, Tagore sought out creative intersubjective relations, he consciously eschewed an internal Orientalism with respect to the national northeast, seeking rather for cultural variants and alternatives to the problematics of imagining national subjectivities. In the vein of New Historicism, Ghosh stretches the performative text of Tagore's fictions to ground them in his living relations with the court and commoners of this internal "East." She thus reflects on Tagore's texts set in such cultures to highlight alternative patriarchies and female subjectivities, based on ethical and aesthetic variations of national cultural codes, conducive to alternative national modernities. Ghosh demonstrates how the privileged braiding of the martial (*vira*) and the affective (*karuna*) in the cultural imaginary of this region allows for the thinking of such models of ideality. In the consideration of Tagore's dance drama *Chitrangada*, Ghosh's reflections overlap with those of De in this volume, illuminating certain aspects through attention to cultural history.

No contemporary consideration of Tagore can be complete without a consideration of his place in a national and global politics of representation. What, if anything, does Tagore represent today, or in what ways is Tagore represented in a contested semiotic landscape and even, how did Tagore represent himself in the performative politics of his life and works? The presence of these questions forming the locus of representation can be seen in many of the chapter carried here. While Tagore's voice rose sharply, in his essays on nationalism, against the use of ideological and iconic representation in identity politics—a critique relumed in times closer to ours by Ashis Nandy in *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism*—even in the post-swadeshi period of Indian nationalism, when he withdrew from the thick of anti-colonial activity, he was conscious of his own iconicity and continued to use it strategically for national and other liberation projects. Upholding the telos of individual freedom in a participatory global democracy, in a lived world of contested ideologies fought through the politics of representation, Tagore engaged in a strategic essentialism, his own iconicity a rallying force for a freedom from icons and the collective enterprise of creative growth toward universality.

In this context, Fakrul Alam's chapter outlines a historiography of national identity politics in Bangladesh, demonstrating the centrality of the politics of language to this process and Tagore's semiotic inseparability from this discourse.

Saurav Dasthakur moves the hands of the clock back to demonstrate how Tagore constructed a regional modern Bengali subject through the hybrid discourses he brought into engagement in the poetry and music of his songs in the form now known as *Rabindrasangeet*. Classical ragas, a variety of regional and national folk idioms and Western musical forms, were braided to create a community of address whose locus was a new urban vernacular identity, braiding elite, subaltern, and cosmopolitan subjectivities. From this consideration, he fast forwards to our times to question the contemporary relevance of *Rabindrasangeet* outside of its incessantly reproduced mechanical and pedagogical simulacra. In answer to his own question, he provides examples of the continued critical and creative function of *Rabindrasangeet* in autonomous projects of soul-making.

My own essay on the conversation of portraits in the intersubjective habitus of Jorasanko makes a distinction between the politics of representation and the fluid dialectic of becoming, both of which Tagore found it necessary to engage in. The complexities of their imbrication and co-existence continue to be part of the thematic of worlding in our age of the world picture and my essay attempts to explore this dimension in the Tagorean vein of affective intersubjectivity. Saranindranath Tagore turns to Tagore's last years to postulate an ontogenetic shift resulting in what he calls a "late style" in the poet and painter. The Vedantic lineage, inherited from his father, Debendranath, to which Tagore belonged as a Brahmo, kept its intimate closeness to the Vaishnav theism which formed his earlier family heritage. This granted coherence to the world and to the invocatory power of language as expressions of the god-in-life, *jibandebata*, that he related to all his life. But Saranindranath sees an Advaitic turn in the poet's last years, in which words and images lost their significatory powers and turned merely indicative instead of an experience of transcendence and utter non-duality beyond their range. This is a final refusal of representation, a post-human border-crossing, whose implications are yet to be fully articulated or understood.

All the scholars contributing to this volume have been prominently engaged in contemporary readings of Tagore texts and/or related texts of Indian national history in this 150th year of the poet's birth. We are particularly fortunate to include the sharings of the two editors (Fakrul Alam and Radha Chakravarty) and the author of the Foreword (Amit Chaudhuri) for the recent Harvard University Press publication of *The Essential Tagore*. Esha Niyogi De's recently published *Empire, Media and the Autonomous Woman: A Feminist Critique of Postcolonial Thought* (Oxford, 2011) features readings of several Tagore texts and dance dramas, and her essay in this volume has been adapted from a chapter in that book. Rijula Das and Makarand Paranjape have produced a recent nuanced translation of Tagore's essay *Visva Sahitya* (World Literature) on which Paranjape's essay in this volume is based. Anuradha Ghosh's recent book *Filming Fiction—Tagore, Premchand and Ray* (jointly edited with M. Asaduddin) (Oxford, 2012) is in the area of intersemiotic translations and focuses on the issue of filmic transpositions of Premchand and Tagore narratives by Satyajit Ray. Patrick Colm Hogan has written introductions to new editions of Tagore's selected stories (2011) and to Reminiscences (forthcoming). Rosinka Chaudhuri's essay on "The Rustle of

Language" was published in the July 2011 issue of the journal *Seminar*, from which it has been reproduced. A number of other contributions here were adapted or reproduced from talks and publications. Amit Chaudhuri's essay "Two Giant Brothers" was first published in the London Review of Books (2006) and later collected in *Clearing A Space* (Chaudhuri 2008). It is reproduced here with references and footnotes. An earlier version of Sachidananda Mohanty's paper was presented at the Indian Council for Cultural Relations international seminar on "Rabindranath Tagore: At Home in the World" at Kathmandu, Nepal, September 22–24, 2011. Mohanty gratefully acknowledges support received from the ICCR, the Indian Cultural Centre, Kathmandu, and Professor Indra Nath Choudhury and extends his thanks to the editor of this volume for his suggestions and inputs. Earlier versions of Makarand Paranjape's essay were presented at the 2nd Asia, Africa Latin America Literature Forum, Incheon, Korea, April 28–30, 2011, and at Rabindranath Tagore Birth Centenary Celebrations at the University of Yangon, Myanmar, August 11–12, 2011. An earlier version of Radha Chakravarty's essay was presented at a conference on "Contemporizing Tagore and the World," held in Dhaka (Bangladesh) on April 29–May 1, 2011, organized by Jamia Millia Islamia University, University of Dhaka, and Visva-Bharati. Earlier versions of the essays by Fakrul Alam, Patrick Hogan, Esha De, and Debashish Banerji were presented at "Towards the Universal Man" Tagore Festival, Los Angeles, September 29–October 2, 2010. With the exception of the essays by Dasthakur, Tagore, Mitter, and Satpathy, the chapters in this book were published as a special Tagore issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Thought* from Vadodara, India, in January 2012.

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Chapter 2
The Rustle of Language

Rosinka Chaudhuri

Abstract In this essay, named, after Roland Barthes, "The Rustle of Language," the author explores the manner in which Rabindranath crafted his poetic voice in the poem "*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*" [The Waterfall Awakens from a Dream], published when he was twenty-one, out of the vicissitudes of his early experimentation with meter and form in the shadow of other voices, other rhythms. The author demonstrates how in this poem the poet constructed, out of materials he had already played with before, his particular poetic voice. This discussion attempts thereby to understand why the English translation of Rabindranath's Bengali poetry inevitably fails at many levels, most of all failing to capture the repetion and rhythm of the Bengali words and lines as they rustle and murmur on the page or in the ear with a life of their own.

Keywords Poetics · Bengali literature · Literary history · Creativity · Psychology · *Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*

At the start of the year 1877, when he was just sixteen, Rabindranath lay down one day in the inner quarters of a corner room of his ancestral home in Jorasanko, Calcutta, and wrote a line upon a slate: *gahana kusuma kunja majhe* (within the dense flowering woods). In his recollection, "It had one day become very cloudy at mid-day. In that cloud-darkened delight of leisure, lying on my stomach upon a bed in a room, I wrote upon a slate: *gahana kusuma kunja majhe*. Writing it made me very happy…." (*Jibansmriti*, 462). And rightfully so, for this was one of the finest lines in the collection of poems/songs that appeared in every issue of *Bharati* save one between the years 1877–1878 and was later to be known in book form as *Bhanusingher Padabali*.

All translations in this chapter from Rabindranath Tagore are mine.

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The first line he wrote, however, was not the first poem he published in this collection. He had published the first poem of *Bhanusingha* in the *Ashwin* (September/October) issue of *Bharati* in 1877; this poem was to later undergo many revisions and become standardized as the song "*sawan gagane ghor ghanaghata / nishitha yamini re*" (Splendidly dark with clouds is the monsoon sky / in the dead of night).

This was the start of the regular serial publication in *Bharati* of poems written under the pseudonym *Bhanusingha*, the name that meant Rabindranath, which appeared listed on the contents page of that periodical as *Bhanusingher Kabita* (Bhanusingha's Poems).[1] The story behind the publication of these poems by a sixteen-year-old Rabindranath has been told many times and is well known. Like most of the reconstruction of his early work, this story too is heavily premised upon Rabindranath's own version of its composition as he presented it in *Jibansmriti*.

From 1874 onward, three years before the first line of *Bhanusingha* was written, Akshaychandra Sarkar, Saradacharan Mitra, and Barodakanta Mitra had edited and published a selection of poems titled *Prachin Kavyasangraha* (Collection of Old Poetry) serially in the *Sadharani* periodical, edited by Akshaychandra. Here, the verses of the medieval Vaishnava poet Vidyapati were reprinted along with footnotes; Rabindranath has described how the volumes of the periodical were purloined by him from his brother Jyotirindranath's collection. ["My elders were regular subscribers but not regular readers. Therefore, to collect and take them away was not too much trouble" (*Jibansmriti*, 453)]. Reading the poetry of Vidyapati enraptured him, and making a careful study of the use of language in this old dialect in self-made notebooks, he proceeded to fashion in that language a number of poems in the style of the medieval poet.[2]

It should not, perhaps, be surprising that Rabindranath first found his voice in poetry in the disguise of an imagined medieval poet long dead, in a language strangely obscure and archaic, tangentially placed within modern Bengali as it was spoken and written at the time in literary quarters. Inspired by the legend of Thomas Chatterton, whom he had first heard about from his brother's friend, Akshay Chaudhuri, the person he credited with introducing him to much of English literature in this period, he set about replicating the achievement. "Keeping aside the unnecessary part about his suicide," he writes, "I rolled up my sleeves and began my endeavour to become the second Chatterton" (*Jibansmriti*, 461).

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[1] The name Bhanusingha was derived from Bhanu, another word for the sun, or Rabi. The full name in both cases would then mean "lord of the sun"; it has been speculated that the name was one given to him by Kadambari Debi. Many of the poems that were being published in *Bharati* at this time, apart from the ones that belong to this collection of the *Bhanusingher Padabali*, were signed with the initial letter "Bh," revealing the extent to which the half-hidden half-revealed productions of this period shelter under the anonymity of pseudonyms and one-letter signatures, shy of proclaiming their nature and identity out loud and in the open.

[2] His mastery over the subject was so complete that a few years later, upon re-reading Akshaychandra's text, he wrote (no doubt goaded by that critic's unsparing criticism of his own poetry so far) a trenchant and unsparing critique of the lazy and slipshod manner in which much of the work had been done in presenting Vidyapati in Prachin Kavyasangraha.

The difficulty and ambiguity of the Maithili dialect (a mixture of old Hindi and Bengali prevalent in eastern India) that he simulated to write these poems appealed to him for precisely those very reasons: their half-hidden, half-revealed nature, similar, he said, to the attraction held by "the seeds of trees, containing a mystery undiscovered underneath the earth." Those were seeds that contained embryonically within their encrypted code, in the disguise of Bhanusingha, the core of Rabindranath's poetic vocation, the musicality and mystery that his mature poetry would convey later with a direct intensity.

Pretending that he had discovered an old and tattered manuscript of a medieval poet named Bhanusingha in the library of the Brahmo Samaj, he read his poems out to a friend. The friend, in turn, excited by their beauty, claimed they were better than anything written by Chandidas or Vidyapati, and wanted them for publication, at which point Rabindranath informed him that the poems were his own by showing him his exercise book in which they had been written. The friend then apparently became very grave, and had to concede, "Not bad at all" (*Jibansmriti*, 462). At the time that the poems were appearing serially in *Bharati*, Dr. Nishikanta Chattopadhyay, an academic, was said to have written a dissertation on these poems while in Germany, comparing them to European lyric poetry, thereby obtaining his doctorate on the subject, Rabindranath reported inaccurately, but with great pride, in *Jibansmriti* (p. 462).

Nevertheless, this section on the Bhanusingha poems in his autobiography, *Jibansmriti*, ends with a disclaimer. While expressing his satisfaction with the language of the poems, which closely resembled the language of the medieval Vaishnava poets, he nevertheless concludes by saying that they do not stand up to careful scrutiny as their made-up nature is then revealed; "they are not like the flowing, heart-melting tune of the *nahabat* (shehnai performance), but merely like the sound of the contemporary cheap English organ's *tung tang*" (62).

In later life too, he referred to this collection as "an example of unlawful entry (*anadhikar prabesh*) into the precincts of literature," (cited in Prabodhchandra Sen, *Bhorer Pakhi*, 131) and it has been surmised that he might never have published the poems separately in book form if not for the shocking suicide in April 1884 of his beloved sister-in-law Kadambari Debi, wife of his older brother Jyotirindranath, close friend, childhood companion, and muse, at this time. In the dedication to *Bhanusingha Thakurer Padabali*, he wrote: "You had requested, many a time, that I publish the poems of Bhanusingha. At that time I did not grant your request. Today I have done so, and you are not here to see it." Yet his own attachment to these adolescent compositions can be seen from the fact that although he omitted almost every other poem he wrote at this time from the precincts of the *Rabindra Rachanabali*, this group of poems were not conferred the same ignominy, but remain enshrined in his Collected Works in their rightful place.

After the first line of *Bhanusingha* had come into being, it took another six years to the publication of *Prabhatsangeet* in 1883, his breakthrough volume of poetry. (In the meanwhile, his first collection of poems, *Sandhyasangeet*, had been published to indifferent praise.) This collection included a poem that he felt bore the stamp of his own individual voice with a certainty and clarity not evident so

far—*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga* ("The Waterfall Awakens from a Dream")—which was first published in *Bharati* on December 2, 1882. When it was later incorporated into *Prabhatsangeet*, the poem added sixty-seven lines to the original two hundred and one lines; subsequently, it underwent many changes and is currently available in the *Rabindra Rachanabali* in one hundred and fifty-four lines; however, the version in the *Sanchayita* is compressed to a mere forty-three lines.

It was with the publication of *Prabhatsangeet* that the tide of literary criticism turned substantially in his favor within the field of Bengali letters—critics and journalists across the spectrum, from Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay in the *Education Gazette* to the reviewers in *Somprakash* and *Sanjibani*—all published praise for the simple, unaffected marvel of language accomplished in some of the poems in this volume. Rabindranath grudgingly acknowledged as much of his own early work here: "In the period of *Sandhyasangeet* my mind was taken over by a cloying articulation of my inner forceful feelings alone. With the season of *Prabhatsangeet*, a few spontaneous forms began to be seen; that is, these productions were not the flowers but the fruit of harvest, although grown on uneducated, un-tilled farm land" (quoted in Pal, 132).

A long poem (in some versions perhaps too long), revised over and over again, the free flowing lyricism of "*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*" was contained in a meter and rhythm of astonishing suppleness; the words on the page quiver and tremble with an intensity captured almost entirely through sound and language, constituting a magnum leap forward toward a form and style that was to become so distinctively his own. Revelatory and celebratory in its incantation of the beauty of morning, the poem's narrative resides entirely in feeling and sensation, capturing the wonder of the world as the poet sees it one extraordinary dawn. While his essays and letters of this period were self-assured, argumentative, and sometimes sharp and impassioned, his poetry was still afloat upon a vague inner turbulence.

Returning home from England in 1880, he had published, in quick succession, four different volumes—*Balmiki Pratibha, Bhagnahriday, Rudrachanda,* and *Europe Prabashir Patra*—each in a separate genre, and each achieving some element of success within its own precinct. Yet in the matter of poetry, although he had just published the collection, *Sandhyasangeet*, he was still to make an advance into his own domain, both in his own perception as well as in the reader's. With this poem, that breakthrough was finally accomplished.

Constructing the story of his beginning as a poet later in life, he regarded the poetic accomplishments before this as merely the prelude to "*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*," a poem that he said inaugurated his adult career as a poet, as is evident in his description of it as "the Preface or Introduction to his entire poetic corpus" ("*amar shamasta kabyer bhumika*") (*Jibansmriti*, 492). Written in one sitting over the entire afternoon and evening of a day of extraordinary experience, Rabindranath has immortalized the poem not only on its own merit, but also upon the basis of the revelation on which it was sourced, an experience of whose importance he wrote repeatedly. Describing the sensation in *Jibansmriti*, he wrote:

At the place where the Sudder Street road came to an end one could see the trees in the garden of perhaps the Free School. One morning I stood on the

veranda and looked in that direction. At that time, the sun was rising from behind the leaves of those trees. As I stood there and looked, suddenly, in a moment, the curtain fell from my eyes. I looked, and saw the world and this earth enveloped in an astonishing glory, everything swaying in joy and beauty. Piercing in one moment through the many layers of dejection in which my heart was covered, my entire inner self was scattered in the light of the universe. On that day itself, "*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*" seemed to flow out of me like a waterfall (492).

This was not the only occasion wherein Rabindranath had felt such revelatory joy—he catalogs many other instances in his childhood and life of a similar nature—but certainly it was the most sustained and powerful experience among them. "Piercing the veil" was an expression he used repeatedly to indicate, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out, "seeing beyond" the "*pratyahik*" or the everyday, which "was '*anitya*,' impermanent, subject to the changes of history. The realm of the poetic laced the everyday but had to be revealed by the operation of the poetic eye" (168).

The expression of wonder insists always upon that which cannot be understood but at the same time that which is undeniably premised upon the exigency of the experience. Ranajit Guha calls this heightened joy of wonder by its name in Indian esthetics, "*chamatkara*," pointing out that it is usually rendered in English as "supernormal rapture" (67). Of the three similar childhood experiences cited by Rabindranath in the last essay of his life, *Sahitye Aitihasikata* (Historicality in Literature),[3] of glistening dew, gathering clouds, and a cow licking a foal, each occasion was in fact a repetition or premonition of that central experience on Sudder Street, which was "a matter of seeing in a way Tagore claims to have been uniquely his own" (77). Guha then quotes Rabindranath himself in corroboration: "It is in this [seeing] that one is a poet" (80).[4]

To experience the world as an outsider was a feeling that animated other poems written at this time ("*Prabhat Utsav*," "*Ananta Maran*," and "*Ananta Jiban*," "*Maha Swapna*," "*Srishti*, *Stithi*, *Pralay*"), but nowhere more clearly and extensively as in this one, "*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga.*" The feeling had partly animated his composition of *Balmiki Pratibha* as well, where, in language that was strangely reminiscent of his experience of writing *Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*, he had said he wanted to capture, in the character of Balmiki, how "a deep pity from within had pierced the dacoit's stern exterior. His natural humanity had been covered over by hard habit. One day, there was turmoil, and the inner man was suddenly impelled into the open" (Tagore, *Balmiki Pratibha* 1). Whatever the internal impulse of wonder upon which "*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*" was composed, however, it is in its formal execution that the poem achieves a rupture in relation to Rabindranath's entire poetic corpus.

This might not be his finest poem and is certainly not among the best poems of his career, but in it he constructs, out of material he has already played with before in *Bhanusingher Padabali*, his particular poetic voice. Discarding the disguise of

[3] All quotes from this essay follow Guha's translation in the appendix to his book (pp. 95–99).

[4] Critic and poet Sankha Ghosh has just written on the importance of "dekha" [seeing] to Rabindranath in an eponymous special issue of *Desh* in May 2011.

the Vaishnava poet, he assumes his own contemporary form, in the accomplishment of which there was at work not some mystical revelation alone but a hard fought attainment at a formal level. With this poem, the early style, prickly with the impediment of other poetic preoccupations and voices, largely disappears.

If Rabindranath's adolescent nationalist poems had been written in imitation of Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay and the patriotic feelings in the air at the time, and if the first lyric poems too were modeled in imitation of Biharilal, Shelley, and the other Romantics, then here, in this poem mainly, the tone and rhythm, the language, and feeling that permeate his poetic voice—a voice so distinctively his own that it later becomes instantly recognizable—are put into place for the first time. What is remarkable about the poem is also the manner in which the poet lets himself loose, sets himself free of all previous conventions and expectations:

Bahudin pare ekti kiran
Guhay diyachhe dekha,
Porechhe amar andhar shalile
Ekti kanaka rekha.
Praner abeg rakhite nari
Thara thara kore kanpichhe bari,
Talamala jal kare thal thal,
Kal kal kari dhorechhe taan.
Aaji e prabhate ki jani keno re
Jagiya uthechhe pran (*Rabindra Rachanabali*, I:51).

(After many days has one ray
Appeared in the cave,
Upon the dark waters of my heart
Has fallen a single trace of light.
I cannot contain my heart's ardour
The water trembles, it trembles,
It talks and sings a complicated tune.
Today in this morning I don't know why
My heart has awakened.)

The translation into English of Rabindranath's Bengali—not only here, but usually—fails on many levels, inevitably; but most of all, it fails to capture the repetition of the words and the rhythm of the lines as they are spoken aloud. In their content and subject matter, they repeat the first words of poetry Rabindranath thought he read in Vidyasagar's children's primer, "*Jal pare, pata nore*" (*Jibansmriti*, 412) (Water falls, the leaves move), which for him, he said, constituted the substance of all poetry. In their original spoken Bengali rhythm, the words work to constitute what Barthes famously called "the rustle of language": "to rustle is to make audible the very evaporation of noise: the tenuous, the blurred, the tremulous are received as the signs of an auditory annulation" (76). "Can language rustle?" Barthes asks, for it seems impossible, as in language, "there always remains too much meaning" for that to happen.

But what is impossible is not inconceivable: The rustle of language forms a utopia. Which utopia? "That of a music of meaning; in its utopian state, language would be enlarged, I should even say denatured to the point of forming a vast auditory fabric in which the semantic apparatus would be made unreal; the phonic, metric, vocal signifier would be deployed in all its sumptuosity, without a sign ever becoming detached from it (ever naturalizing this pure layer of delectation), but also—and this is what is difficult—without meaning being brutally dismissed, dogmatically foreclosed, in short castrated" (77).

Into that utopia of freedom—to paraphrase Rabindranath in "Where the Mind is Without Fear"—has this poem awoken; and the poet is aware of the impossible nature of this attainment. Over and over again, in poems ranging from *Balaka* to *Sonar Tori* to *Manasi*, this would be the unique character of Rabindranath's achievement, as he touched again and again with a surer and surer touch this state of utopia where what he achieves in language is "that meaning which reveals an exemption of meaning or—the same thing—that non-meaning which produces in the distance a meaning henceforth liberated from all the aggression of which the sign, formed in the 'sad and fierce history of men,' is the Pandora's box" (78).

It is utopia, as Barthes points out, that often "guides the investigations of the avant-garde," and it is to be found in many experimentations of the avant-garde. His own discovery of it is far removed from the world of Rabindranath, but has much to say in aid of pinpointing exactly the quality of the auditory that resides in Rabindranath's untranslatable poems. It was while watching, one evening, Antonioni's film on China, particularly a certain scene in which some children sit on a village street against a wall and read aloud together, but each from a different book, that Barthes discovers the rustle of language in the doubly impenetrable Chinese of different simultaneous readings. What he hears, however, in "a kind of hallucinated perception," is what one hears in the poetry of Rabindranath: "the music, the breath, the tension, the application" (p. 78).

Is that all one needs, Barthes wonders, "in order to make language rustle, in the rare fashion, stamped with delectation"—'just speak all at the same time?'" "No, of course not; the auditory scene requires an erotics (in the broadest sense of the term), the élan, or the discovery, or the simple accompaniment of an emotion" (p. 79). This was present for him in that moment in "the countenances of the Chinese children," and it is present for the readers of Bengali, "stamped with delectation," as Barthes felt, when they read, or read out, the lines "*Aaji e prabhate ki jani keno re/Jagiya uthechhe pran*" in '*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*' above. (Other lines from other poems fulfill a similar function; so we can think of, for instance, the famous lines in the poem "*Duhsamay*": "*tobu bihanga, ore bihanga mor, /ekhoni, andha, bandha koro na pakha*" (*Rabindra Rachanabali*) ("And yet, O bird, O bird of mine, /do not blind, do not close your wings just now).

What Barthes calls the "erotics," the "élan" or the "simple accompaniment of an emotion" are an essential adjunct to the sound of the language in Rabindranath's best poetry, which accomplishes its effect upon these twin premises. The reader of poetry, especially the poetry of Rabindranath, must feel akin to the ancient Greek as described by Hegel that Barthes ends his brief essay with: "He interrogated, Hegel

says, passionately, uninterruptedly, the rustle of branches, of springs, of winds, in short, the shudder of Nature, in order to perceive in it the design of an intelligence." To interrogate that shudder of meaning, Barthes says in closing, is to listen to "the rustle of language," "that language which for me, modern man, is my Nature" (79).

"Modern man" is the term that tenuously links the likes of Barthes with Tagore, for the experience upon which both premise their engagement with the creative is that of modernity. What Rabindranath achieves with the poem "*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*" may be compared to what Adorno had said about the apotheosis of Beethoven's accomplishment in the Appassionata, that it was "more compacted, closed, and 'harmonic' than the late quartets," as well as "in equal measure more subjective, autonomous and spontaneous" (13).[5]

From "*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*" onward, in the mystery of his most beautiful poems, the "subjectivist approach" predominates—"the rejection of all conventions, and the remoulding of those that prove inevitable in accordance with the requirements of expression." It is this subjectivity that will go on to create the mature works of perfection, works that are the "products of a subjectivity or 'personality' uncompromisingly articulating itself, which for the sake of its own expression, breaks open the roundness of conventional forms" (Adorno 12). The best poems of Rabindranath will follow "*Nirjharer Swapnabhanga*" in achieving within themselves a similar "harmonic synthesis" as in Beethoven's best works that was apparently miraculously attained in that poem on an extraordinary morning in Sudder Street, Calcutta, in 1882.

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[5] It might be worth mentioning, in the contexts of both creativity and modernity, that T. J. Clark, writing recently in the *London Review of Books*, has invoked Barthes' Rustle of Language in the context of an exhibition of Matisse's cut outs. Looking at a documentary film on Matisse as he cuts out the shapes from paper he writes: "I thought, looking at the film sequence, that I could hear the paper shapes rustle. And the word—the imagined sound—sent me back to a wonderful essay by Roland Barthes called 'The Rustle of Language', and especially to its last two sentences: I imagine myself today something like the ancient Greek as Hegel describes him: he interrogated, Hegel says, passionately, uninterruptedly, the rustle of branches, of springs, of winds, in short, the shudder of Nature, in order to perceive in it the design of an intelligence. And I—it is the shudder of meaning I interrogate, listening to the rustle of language, that language which for me, modern man, is my Nature. Was Matisse at the end of his life the Greek or the modern? It is the question posed by this extraordinary show, and one in which the whole meaning and fate of 'modern' art is, triumphantly and sometimes painfully, at stake" (Clark 2014).

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Chapter 3
Translating Tagore: Shifting Paradigms

Radha Chakravarty

Abstract This essay deals with the question of translatability and Tagore's own ambivalence and anxiety of adequate translation of his works from Bengali. Exploring the theoretical problem of mimesis as expressed through the relation between "original" and "copy," it construes translations as interpretations and temporally situated renewals, performative and political, and as with all textual products, original in their own right. It makes its points through a variety of different translations, often of the same text.

Keywords Translation · Cultural politics · Mimesis · Bengali literature · Literary history · Civilization studies

When we speak of translating Tagore, it is worth remembering that it was primarily for his works in English that he won the Nobel Prize in 1913. Yet Tagore's letters reveal his anxieties about the risks that translation can entail, and the flaws in his own English translations.[1] In a letter to Edward Thompson, he says: "In my translations I timidly avoid all difficulties, which has the effect of making them smooth and thin. I know I am misrepresenting myself … to the Western reader" (February 2, 1921). He acknowledges the "cracks and gaps" in his translations, (August 5, 1921), and declares: "I have come to the conclusion that translating a poem is doing it wrong, specially when the original belongs to a language which is wholly alien to the medium of its translation" (April 16, 1922). Tagore's letters also betray his insecurity about his ability to translate into English, for he writes despairingly: "I have done gross injustice to my original productions partly owing to my incompetence and partly to carelessness… I should have to rely upon my

[1] See, for instance, Thompson (1993), Trivedi (1993) and Das Gupta (2002).

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English friends for the revision, for I never can trust my own English" (April 10, 1935).

Tagore's self-doubts are based on certain assumptions about translation which I will examine, and challenge, in this paper. For he assumes that the acceptability of a translation depends on its fidelity to the source text, that the translated work is subordinate to the authority of the original, that it is "wrong" to translate into a language that is culturally far removed from the original, and that only an Englishman understands the proper use of English. These assumptions are not unique to Tagore; they represent some commonly held views about translation that have formed the traditional basis for judging and evaluating literary translations. Traditional theories of translation vest primary authority in the source text, which is regarded as not only prior to, but more powerful than, the translation. The translator's voice is therefore assumed to be inferior, secondary, and derivative—in fact, the translator is not supposed to possess a voice at all.[2] The translation is supposed to be a mere echo of the original. This attitude is related in part to theories of language, for until recently, language was studied for its coherence rather than its disruptive potential. But contemporary theory looks at language as a site for contestation, where the interactants are aware of the power of words. This paradigm shift is visible in the domain of translation, where a translator can now challenge the authority of the source text, in search of a voice of her own. For Tagore translators today, this search for a voice can be both liberating and creative, but it also has interventionist potential. That is my argument in this paper, illustrated with references to my own practice in the field of Tagore translations.

For decades, Tagore translations were confined in the straitjacket of "fidelity," as long as copyright remained the exclusive privilege of Visva-Bharati, where the "house style" decreed that accuracy, or close adherence to the original, was the only "permissible" approach. Yet this overlooks the fact that a preoccupation with "fidelity" or "authenticity" was not part of the tradition in India before colonial times. Ours was a polyglot culture with a strong oral tradition, and linguistic and regional borders were fluid; in this scenario, it was inevitable that texts should travel in translation. Authorship and copyright did not signify much in a context where the mutability of texts across time and space was more or less taken for granted. As Sujit Mukherjee points out, "*Rupantar* (meaning 'changed in form' or 'in changed form') and *anuvad* ('speaking after' or 'following after') are the commonly understood senses of translation in India, and neither term demands fidelity to the original" (80). It was with the introduction of print culture, and as a result of exposure to the Western tradition with its notions of authorship and authority, that concern with copyright, ownership of texts, and authenticity became part of the Indian publishing scene. A market-oriented publishing scenario also gave added

[2] Canadian critic Sherry Simon points out the images of dominance, fidelity, and betrayal in most translation theory. To counter this, Simon (1996) speaks of a committed translation project: "For feminist translation, fidelity is to be directed toward neither the author nor the reader, but toward the writing project—a project in which both writer and translator participate" (2).

impetus to this paradigm shift. The concern with fidelity in the field of Tagore translations needs to be interpreted in terms of this historical context.

This explains Tagore's own anxiety about his works in translation and also Visva-Bharati's attempt to preserve Tagore's works in their "pure" form, even in translation. Yet as Tagore himself was aware, the rapid decline in his international reputation shortly after he won the Nobel Prize was to a great extent due to faulty translations of his work. Tagore often felt out of step with the literary and political establishment in his own country and therefore longed for international recognition. He wrote to Edward Thompson on September 20, 1921: "All along my literary career I have run against the taste of my countrymen, at least those of them who represent the vocal portion of my province" (Alam and Chakravarty 2011: 114). Tagore knew he was controversial in India, and his public image mattered to him greatly. Hence his concern about the quality of his works in translation, and his distress over translations that he felt had failed to do justice to his writings in Bengali. In his own translations, he often tried to please his Western audience by diluting the cultural specificity of the Bengali originals. Edward Thompson complains: "More and more he toned down or omitted whatever seemed to him characteristically Indian, which very often was what was gripping and powerful. He despaired too much of ever persuading our people to be interested in what was strange to them."[3] As he became busy with his travels and lecture schedules, Tagore began to leave the task of translating his works to friends and associates whose competence was questionable. "Ill-judged selection and unevenness of translation styles conveyed little of the vigour and beauty of his Bengali stories and his experiments with Bengali prosody" (Lago and Warwick 1989: 19). There were of course other reasons for the decline in Tagore's reputation. His anti-imperialist stance in the *Nationalism* lectures, for instance, made him unpopular in the West. Nevertheless, translation, which had played a major role in his meteoric rise to international fame, also had much to do with his fall from grace in the eyes of the western world.

Although Tagore's fame began to fade, he always had admirers in different parts of the world, and his works continued to be translated, in his lifetime and afterward. Yet these translations often did him a disservice. Macmillan's *Collected Poems and Plays of Rabindranath Tagore* (1936), the first collection of Tagore's writings in the English language, remained in circulation for a long time and was responsible for creating many misconceptions about his work. Although it was an inadequate selection, it projected the impression of a complete collection of Tagore's writings in English and also did not acknowledge that many of the pieces were translations from another language, and not originally written in English.

In 1961, the Tagore birth centenary gave a new impetus to Tagore translators. Apart from translations of individual works, *A Tagore Reader*, edited by Amiya Chakravarty, and *Toward Universal Man*, published by Asia Publishing House in New York, are two notable attempts to anthologize Tagore's works in English translation. Even after the centenary, publications of Tagore's writings in translation continued to appear. *Boundless Sky* (1964), published by Visva-Bharati, is a

[3] Edward Thompson, *Time and Tide*, 16 August 1941, cited in Thompson (1993, p. 25).

selection of Tagore's stories, poems, and prose writings. These translations, many either done by Tagore himself, or approved by him, are likely to strike today's reader as dated. *Poems of Rabindranath Tagore* (1966), commissioned by the Tagore Commemorative Volume Society and edited by Humayan Kabir, is a selection of 101 Tagore poems in translation. *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, published by Sahitya Akademi between 1994 and 1996 and, edited by Sisir Kumar Das, are a monumental effort to anthologize Tagore's works in English, including those in translation. *Rabindranath Tagore: An Anthology* (1997), edited by Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, though published much later, includes many of the older translations produced during Tagore's lifetime. Everywhere in these translations is the specter of authenticity, the fear of the translations being labeled "unfaithful."

With the lapse of copyright in 2001, there has been an unprecedented spurt in Tagore translations by diverse hands, in diverse modes, a trend that gained added momentum on account of Tagore's 150th birth anniversary. *The Oxford Tagore Translations* represent, for instance, a collaborative, scholarly effort to publish Tagore translations in a series of edited volumes. The fourth volume of *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore*, published by the Sahitya Akademi in 2007 and edited by Nityapriya Ghosh, is another massive and erudite miscellany. In contrast to the academic framework of the Oxford and Sahitya Akademi volumes, popular publishing houses in India, such as Penguin, Rupa, and Roli Books, have also been publishing Tagore's works in translation, intended for the general reader. With the sesquicentenary, the number of anthologies and omnibuses of Tagore's works has also been on the rise.

Today, the Tagore translator enjoys a freedom that is as full of creative possibility as it is fraught with danger, for it has become impossible to evade a host of challenging questions about authorship and authority, text and context, source and target cultures, and the very status of translation itself. Now that Tagore's works are out of copyright, who owns the source texts? Does the authority rest with the author, the translator, the publisher, or the reader? Where, and to whom, does the translation belong? Should a translation be domesticated or foreignized? What are the politics of language and location that come into play when a Bengali text is translated into English? What are the market forces that come into play in determining the circulation and reception of a translated work? Does the translator have the right to alter the original? Where does liberty end and license begin?

These are some of the issues that I find myself compelled to negotiate in my own practice as a translator. These questions were central to the choices that my co-editor Fakrul Alam and I had to make, for instance, as we worked on *The Essential Tagore*, our anthology of Tagore's writings, featuring in a single giant volume the work of thirty translators across ten literary genres. To an extent, therefore, it is useful to treat this project as a case study in the present discussion of contemporary Tagore translations. Breaking away from the conventional mold of uniformity, our collection aims to demonstrate the widely divergent ways in which Tagore can be translated today. In a significant change of stance, it was Visva-Bharati that first commissioned this project, a collaborative venture involving

editors and translators of Indian and Bangladeshi origin that would take Tagore out of the coterie culture of Kolkata and Santiniketan, and reinstate him as a South Asian writer of world stature. Later, with Harvard opting to publish the world edition, the project acquired a wider international dimension, bringing with it the added challenges of addressing a multiple audience.

In our attempt to explore the heterogeneity of the field of Tagore translations, we encouraged our contributors, located in different parts of India and abroad, to express their individual perspectives and practice their own methodologies, which are too varied to dovetail neatly with each other in a clearly demarcated "house style." In fact, we have even carried two translations of the same song, to indicate the spectrum of possibilities inherent in this inclusive and broad-based approach. The crux of the song "*Akash bhara surya tara*," lies in the refrain, which Ratna Prakash translates as "I wonder, and so I sing" and "I marvel, and so I sing," while Amit Chaudhuri renders the same line as "so, surprised, my song awakens." Ratna Prakash's translation reads:

Starts fill the sky, the world teems with life,
    And amidst it all I find my place!
    I wonder, and so I sing.
I feel in my veins the ebb and flow of Earth's eternal tides
        Pulling this Creation
        I wonder and so I sing.

    Walking along the forest's grassy paths,
I have been entranced by the sudden scent of a flower,
    Around me lie strewn the gifts of joy
        I wonder, and so I raise my song.
            I have seen, I have heard.
I have poured my being upon the breast of Earth,
    Within the known I have found the unknown.
        I marvel and so I sing.

Amit Chaudhuri's rendering of the same song is rather different:

The sky full of the sun and stars, the world full of life,
in the midst of this, I find myself—
so, surprised, my song awakens.

Wave after wave of infinite time, to whose ebb and flow earth sways,
the blood in my veins courses to that measure—
so, surprised, my song awakens.

I've pressed upon each blade of grass on the way to the forest,
my heart's lifted in madness, dazzled by the scent of flowers,
all around me lies this gift, outspread—
so, surprised, my song awakens.

I've listened closely, opened my eyes; poured life into the earth,
looked for the unknown in the midst of the known,
  so, surprised, my song awakens.

In the different versions, the same Bengali word "bismaye" is translated, variously, as "wonder," "marvel," and "surprise," altering the meaning of the entire song. Ratna Prakash's translation is premised upon an understanding of Tagore as a nature poet who responds to the universe in a Romantic vein. But Amit Chaudhuri's understanding of Tagore's worldview is different; calling the song a "paean to coincidence," he explains that he uses the word "surprise" because "the speaker in the song is not just transfixed by the beauty of the universe but by the happenstance that's brought him to it" (Alam and Chakravarty 2011: xxvii). Are these multiple approaches "permissible"? What meaning did Tagore really have in mind? What is the right word, then? These questions are actually irrelevant in this context, because, for practitioners who regard translation as a form of activism, the focus is not on what is translated, but on why it is translated.

The juxtaposition of different translations of the same source text underscores our conviction that translation is not a mere echo of the original, but an act of interpretation where the translators' voices can be heard, in dialogue with, and sometimes in conflict with, the voice of the original. For non-Bengali readers, the presence of multiple versions of the same original would draw attention to the "translatedness" of these texts. For even in the realm of Tagore translations, there is a canonicity that needs to be problematized, emphasizing the contingent nature of all translations.

Both source text and translation are historically situated, after all. When Tagore uses the word "Bangladesh," for instance, he is referring to pre-partition undivided Bengal; but it would be a naïve historical erasure to retain the term in a contemporary translation, because in today's context, "Bangladesh" signifies the independent national entity that did not exist in Tagore's lifetime.

Tagore himself is aware of the mutability of texts and translations. In a letter to James Drummond Anderson dated April 14, 1918, he writes, referring to *Gitanjali*: "one should frankly give up the attempt at reproducing in translation the lyrical suggestions of the original verse and substitute in their place some new quality inherent in the new vehicle of expression" (Alam and Chakravarty 2011: 107). As an author translating his own text, he made extensive changes to the Bengali poems, rendering them as prose poems that defy classification. Commenting on the impact of the English *Gitanjali* upon its international audience, Sujit Mukherjee observes: "Its unique quality was the result of the author endeavouring to be his own translator, in which process he went beyond the bounds of translation and achieved something which should be regarded as transformation" (Mukherjee 5). Yet, as Mukherjee acknowledges, "[t]he very process which makes the English *Gitanjali* such a literary miracle is its greatest disqualification to being regarded as a normal work of translation" (Mukherjee 5). In other words, translators in general would not take such liberties with the original, or their works would not count as translations at all. This anxiety underlies the rather literal, uninspiring quality of the English translations of Tagore that followed his death in 1941. It has taken decades for Tagore translators to emerge from the stranglehold of the demand for authenticity, although Tagore himself had broken the shackles of conformity very early in his career as a translator of his own works.

The translator's search for a voice can also be gendered, demonstrating, as Sherry Simon (1996) says, "how contemporary feminist translation has made gender the site of a consciously transformative project, one which reframes conditions of textual authority" (167). *Boyhood Days*, the title of my English translation of Tagore's memoirs *Chhelebela*, deliberately invokes issues of gender difference that the more inclusive title *My Childhood* would have erased; for as Tagore's text demonstrates, boys and girls were brought up very differently in his time. The title *Boyhood Days* also ironically echoes Taslima Nasrin's *Amar Meyebela*, translated as *My Girlhood*, but of course only informed readers would recognize this. Such deliberate manipulations of the text, regarded by purists as "distortions" of the original, are intended to interrogate the analogy between gender and translation; for translations, like women, are traditionally expected to be subordinate, and faithful, and critiques of translation are often couched in the language of betrayal.

In a sense, of course, every translation is a betrayal of the original. Some local, culture-specific nuances are inevitably lost in translation, for every language has some irreducible cultural terms that do not transfer across linguistic boundaries. The very act of translation thus involves a degree of textual violence, a violation of the source text. Some theorists compare this to cannibalism, a devouring of the original. But translation after all is not merely a verbal transference from one language to another. The operations of language and power are embedded in specific social contexts, and spill over beyond the written page. Theorists recognize now that translations must be seen contextually, in relation to the conditions that govern and surround their production and reception.[4] The cultural border-crossings enacted by translation are never smooth, but the textual violence they entail may have constructive underpinnings, if we regard this as a process of cultural interaction or interpretation, an act of reaching out to others. The destruction of source text paradoxically gives it a new and altered life, in its translated avatar. Translation becomes a test, not only of the elasticity and flexibility of the target language, but of the cultural relations implicit within the process. For interventionist translation does not seek to erase differences. It raises the question, in Satya P. Mohanty's words: "How do we negotiate between my history and yours? How would it be possible for us to recover one commonality, … the imbrication of our various pasts and presents, the ineluctable relationships of shared and contested meanings, values, material resources?" (Mohanty 1988: 130). Such questions are crucial, for they preclude the creation of what Mohanty describes as "debilitatingly insular spaces": "Could we, in other words, afford to have *entirely* different histories, to see ourselves as living and having lived – in entirely heterogeneous and discrete spaces?" (Mohanty 1998: 130).

When Tagore translated the poems in *Gitanjali*, he made some major modifications. In many cases, his poems underwent substantial revisions when they were

[4] Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere look beyond linguistic theories of translation to focus on the interaction between translation and culture, "the larger issues of context, history and convention" (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990, p. 11).

converted into songs. Two such examples figure in *The Essential Tagore*: we have carried double versions of "jibon jakhan shukaye jaye" and "aj jharer ratey." The difference between poetry and song can be seen in the two versions of "jibon jakhan shukaye jaye," translated by Fakrul Alam. The poem reads:

> When life dries up
> Come in a stream of mercy.
> When everything graceful is covered,
> Come in a shower of songs.
>
> When work is overwhelming,
> Creating a din that hems me in,
> In soundless steps, O silent one,
> Come to the outskirts of my heart.
>
> When I have made myself poor
> And my cornered heart lies languishing,
> Open the door, O great-hearted Lord,
> And come in all your Majesty.
>
> When dust storms of desire blind me,
> And I lapse into forgetfulness,
> O Holy one, O ever watchful one,
> Come to me in a blaze of light!

The song version is markedly different:

> When the sap of life shrinks, seek the showers of mercy.
> When all that's lovely is hidden, come sweetly as a song.
> When work overpowers and imprisons me
> Within the frontiers of the heart, O Giver of life, tread softly!
> When denying all pleasures and restricting itself
> My mind droops, freeing it, O Bounteous One, come regally.
> When dust storms of desire blind and make me forgetful,
> O Holy and Vigilant One, come as a fiery, overwhelming light.

In structure, sound, and sense, the different versions affirm Tagore's awareness that texts are not reified, but changeable. The inclusion of these variants is an unconventional editorial move. It gestures at our conviction that although the translator's voice must be recognized, the voice of the original remains of crucial significance and should not be suppressed.

There is a paradigm suggested here, which awaits fuller theorization. It is an interactive model, based on the idea of a productive dialogue between the voices of source text and translation. It is premised on the idea that the spirit of the original should animate the translation, but without overriding the unique quality of the translation itself. Here, the "translatedness" of the translation remains in view, its cultural difference from the source text is not obscured, and the translator's role as cultural mediator is not rendered transparent. Dialogue recognizes difference, but also articulates the desire to communicate across the divisions that has separate self and other, culture from culture. It represents the will to negotiate.

In carrying a text across the border separating one culture from another, the translator is faced with many questions: how much to concede to the target

audience, how much of the cultural context of the source text to convey through paratext—explanation, annotations, and other supplementary material—and how to negotiate untranslatable cultural terms. The answers to these questions entail choices that depend on the translator's agenda, the intended readership, and other factors concerning the production and reception of the translated work. In my own translations, I try to capture the spirit and flavor of the original as closely as possible, but in a modern English idiom that would appeal to the contemporary reader. For as G. N. Devy declares, "Translation is … an attempted revitalization of the original in another verbal space and temporal span" (Devy 1999: 156).

While Tagore is timid and unsure about the "correctness" of his English, contemporary translations appropriate and Indianize the language in ways that have transformed the English lexicon. At work here is the history of postcolonial translation, which resists the old colonial perception of translation as hegemony, a way of exercising power through consent. Today we are familiar with the narrative of the Orientalist attempt to render the colonized culture transparent through the translation of "native" writings into the colonizer's language, and the Anglicist endeavor to coopt the "native" elite by training them to ape the colonizer's tongue (Bhaduri 2008: xxiv). The interventions of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Tejaswini Niranjana have alerted us to the idea of translation as resistance, where the "native" from the colonized culture appropriates the colonizer's tongue with subversive intent. As Niranjana says, "The post-colonial desire to re-translate is linked to the desire to re-write history" (Niranjana 1992: 172). She proposes "a practice of translation that is speculative, provisional, and interventionist" (Niranjana 1992: 173). Tagore translators today no longer try to "domesticate" their translations to make them palatable and accessible to a Western readership, because they are aware of a double audience, in India and abroad. The translators' challenge, here, is to walk the tightrope between using English for a wider audience, and preserving the local nuances that give the original Bengali texts their rhetorical force. For this, they use strategies of foreignization, what Venuti also calls "resistancy" or "minoritizing," a political act that draws attention to the "translatedness" of the text, instead of trying to render the translation transparent. In my translations, I generally avoid italicizing Bengali words, and sometimes use variants of Bengali spellings. Culture-specific terms such as names of days, months, seasons, family relationships, food items, and items of clothing are often left deliberately untranslated, allowing the context to make their meaning clear. In my translation of *Chokher Bali* for instance, I have tried to retain the intricate nuances of Bengali family relationships by using Bengali kinship terms, often with a brief explanation worked into the translation, as in "he used to address Mahendra as Dada or elder brother" (Tagore 2012: 5). Instead of reverting to *Binodini*, the working title that Tagore eventually rejected, I keep the Bengali title *Chokher Bali* because in the text, it is used as a proper name, a form of address; then meaning of the phrase emerges from the translation itself, in the chapter where it first occurs in a dialogue between Asha and Binodini. In a sentence such as "Outside, the cold Magh afternoon was fading," I use the Bengali name of the month "Magh," but insert the adjective "cold" to indicate the season (Tagore 2012: 127). Sometimes I

add a Glossary, but I strive to keep it to a minimum. Variations in spelling Bengali words are significant, because they draw attention to the ruptures that exist between local, national, and global interpretations of Tagore's writings. It is not the source texts that are marked by this textual violence, but the target language itself, which is altered, and thereby enriched.

One of the toughest challenges for the Tagore translator is the problem of negotiating wordplay in the original texts. I encountered this with a vengeance while translating *Shesher Kabita* (*Farewell Song*) for the verbal effervescence of this text is almost impossible to capture in any other language. In some cases, it was possible to find an English approximation of a Bengali pun, as in a passage where the pun on "two-footed, three-footed four-footed, and fourteen-footed gods" works in both languages (Tagore 2011). But in many cases, such puns are inevitably lost in translation, and the translator must find other ways of rendering the wit that is intrinsic to the original. Often, the literal English equivalent does not carry the nuances of a word in the Bengali original. While translating *Gora* for instance, I realized that the term "India" was inadequate to the complexity of Gora's vision of the emergent nation. Hence, I retained the Bengali word "Bharatvarsha." The Bengali word "Khristani" I chose to keep in passages where the term carries overtones of social prejudice; in other places, I translated the word as "Christian" (Tagore 2009: xxii). Such strategies must be invented by the translator in handling cultural nuances for which there are no easy equivalents in the target language.

Tagore is doubtful about the advisability of translating into English, a language alien to Indian tradition; there are others today who question the political correctness of translating into what was once the colonizer's tongue. Certainly, it is imperative to move beyond the dominance of English in the publishing scene, to promote translations of Tagore across modern Indian languages, and there are now some heartening changes taking place in this direction. Tagore's works have also been translated to many other languages across the world, and the sesquicentenary will, it is hoped, give a new lease of life to his writings in these translated avatars. Yet, as Sujit Mukherjee argues, translating into English remains worthwhile in post-Independence India, because English provides a link language in our multilingual culture, and also grants international visibility to writings from our world. It is imperative to bring Tagore out of the coterie culture of the Bengali literary establishment and to draw attention to his extraordinary complexity and versatility, which the Western stereotype of Tagore as the mystical Wise Man from the East, and the Bengali adulation of him as the sanctified "Gurudev," fail to adequately reflect. Seen in this way, translation becomes not merely a linguistic exercise, but an active attempt to imagine into being a diverse community of imagined readers. For as Venuti argues, "translating is also utopian." He says: "The communities fostered by translating are initially potential, signaled in the text, in the discursive strategy deployed by the translator, but not yet possessing a social existence" (Venuti 2000: 498). In this imagined community, as Benedict Anderson says, "the members will never know most of their fellow-members… yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991: 6). It is in this sense that translating Tagore today can be interventionist, transformative, and even utopian.

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Chapter 4
Two Giant Brothers

Amit Chaudhuri

Abstract This essay explores how Tagore questions the terms in which we understand both the contestations and interchanges between 'East' and 'West': he does this by drawing our attention to specific literary instances, notably certain works by Kalidasa. The essay argues that Tagore's 'nature' is not innocent, but a live political instrument; and Tagore's politics has to do with the liberating aspects of humanism, aesthetics and experiencing the world. Tagore claims there was a shift in the English view on nature, as exemplified by the work of the Romantic poets; here, Tagore is making a larger polemical point about the global provenances of Romanticism and, by implication, of modernism. By contrasting this shift with colonialism's classic drive to dominate and exploit nature, Tagore participates in the ongoing revisionary enterprise within the discourse of post-Enlightenment modernity. But the participation is undertaken by Tagore from an 'Indian' vantage-point, a cross-cultural contribution forming part of the hybrid inception and continuance of the Enlightenment.

Keywords Humanism · East–West dialogue · Romanticism · Cultural politics · Goethe · Kalidasa · Civilization studies

Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978, gave intellectuals and writers (themselves, like Said, often migrants) from once-colonized nations a language that liberated and shackled in almost equal measure. The liberations that Said's critical perspective provided, which gave both Europeans and non-Europeans a shrewder and more unillusioned sense of the subterranean ways in which power operated through the cultures of Empire, are now so familiar that we might make the mistake of taking them for granted: which would be foolish, as Eurocentrism is alive and well, and takes new and unexpected forms with every political epoch.

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Besides, as Said himself knew, the force of his critique has diminished and ossified over the years into professional interests and job profiles: this was something he was clearly troubled by.

The limitations of Said's seminal study have to do with the idea it is given us about how the post-colonial might engage with the colonizer's (that is, European, or Western) culture, and with history; and, explicitly, how the European engages with non-European antiquity. And so we are left with a somewhat monochromatic type where both the post-colonial and the European are concerned: A type whose relationship to European or Oriental culture, as may be the case, is defined almost exclusively by questions of power and appropriation, and whose own culture and past are at once static and strangely blurred. *Orientalism*, at least at first glance, does not seem to tell us or explain where its author, in all his many-sidedness, comes from—Western metropolitan intellectual; radical political activist; post-colonial critic; champion of canonical European literature; and classical pianist. What is it about the long histories of colonization and modernity that produced these intriguingly separate, even contrary, selves in Said? *Orientalism*, at least the way we read it now, does not seem to give us an explanation; and for Marxist critics like Aijaz Ahmed, the contradictions are a sign of bad faith.

Yet it is this book that contains a celebration of the author of *La Renaissance Orientale*, Raymond Schwab, and gives us, in Schwab, an outline of another idea of, and way of responding to, the Orient, and, by extension, to a culture other than one's own. Schwab, Said notes, himself looks back to another figure while describing the startling penetration of European culture by the Orient, or their interpenetration by one another: The figure is Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805), "an eccentric theoretician of egalitarianism, a man who managed in his head to reconcile Jansenism with orthodox Catholicism and Brahmanism," and who, journeying to Asia, "travelled as far east as Surat" in India, "there to find a cache of Avestan texts, there also to complete his translation of the *Avesta*" (76). Here, Said quotes Schwab on what the latter saw to be Anquetil-Duperron's legacy; it is one of the most affirmative and exuberant passages on cultural contact ever written, though its rhetoric needs to be distinguished somewhat from declamations on hybridity that are common today:

> In 1759, Anquetil finished his translation of the *Avesta* at Surat; in 1786 that of the Upanishads in Paris—he had dug a channel between the hemispheres of human genius, correcting and expanding the old humanism of the Mediterranean basin… Before him, one looked for information at the remote past of our planet exclusively among the great Latin, Greek, Jewish, and Arabic writers… A universe in writing was unavailable, but scarcely anyone seemed to suspect the immensity of those unknown lands. The realisation began with his translation of the *Avesta*, and reached dizzying heights owing to the exploration in Central Asia of the languages that multiplied after Babel. Into our schools… he interjected a vision of innumerable civilisations from ages past, of an infinity of literatures…(77).

According to Said, the fact that certain Europeans opened themselves, in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, to the cultural store of the Orient resulted, in those individuals, in a "new, triumphant eclecticism." Among the figures he

mentions are, of course, Anquetil-Duperron, and Sir William Jones, the founder of Indology, whose researches on the Orient, Hinduism, and the Sanskrit language include translations from—and, in effect, a recovery of—the great fourth century Sanskrit poet Kalidasa. Yet Said is hard on the latter—"[w]hereas Anquetil opened large vistas, Jones closed them down, codifying, tabulating, comparing" (77)—as if Jones somehow embodied more of the colonial project and less of the "triumphant eclecticism" than Anquetuil-Duperron did. This is borne out, for Said, by Jones's personal itinerary, and, for us, by the way Said describes it: "In due course he was appointed to 'an honourable and profitable place in the Indies,' and immediately upon his arrival there to take up a post with the East India Company began his course of personal study that was to gather in, to rope off, to domesticate the Orient and thereby to turn it into a province of European learning" (77).

This reservation about Jones or what he represents—Jones as a symbol of nineteenth-century European scholarship's "domestication" of the Orient—has been echoed by others. The historian, Dipesh Chakrabarty, says something similar while enquiring into why he finds it possible to engage in a form of serious intellectual commerce with European philosophers, but not with the many Indian ones going back to antiquity: "Sad though it is, one result of European colonial rule in South Asia is that the intellectual traditions once unbroken and alive in Sanskrit or Persian or Arabic are now only matters of historical research for most—perhaps all—modern social scientists in the region" (5–6). But were intellectual traditions in South Asia "once unbroken and alive"—"once" referring to the hazy and golden period before colonization? This speculation is all the more surprising because it comes only a few sentences after Chakrabarty admits, pertinently, that the idea of an "unbroken" European intellectual tradition going back to the Greeks is a relatively recent construct (6). The idea of an unbroken Indian tradition is itself probably an Orientalist invention and Jones one of its early architects.

The "Orient" itself comes into being in the early period of colonialism, and with Orientalist scholarship, as it never had before; and one of the earliest writers to perceive its great cultural, emotional, philosophical, and political potential is Tagore. Certainly, a hundred years prior to Tagore (and to Jones and his researches), no poet in Bengal beheld the Orient and its unbroken past as a foundation, a point of origin, and a parameter for the self and for creativity; there is no "Orient," or "East," for the medieval poets Chandidas, Vidyapati, or Jayadeva, as there is, so profoundly, for Tagore. Nor would it have occurred to Chandidas to locate himself in history and to claim and create pan-Indian lineages with certain Indian poets and texts, with Kalidasa or the Upanishads, as Tagore does. And, for Chandidas, naturally, there is no Europe; for Europe was born, for the Indian, at about the time the Orient was—twins, though not identical ones, that had, in the Indian's mind, a momentous and painfully coeval birth. The researches of the likes of Anquetil-Duperron and even Jones brought to certain Europeans a "new, triumphant eclecticism," says Said; but that eclecticism had a relatively brief legacy in the West: by the early twentieth century, it had narrowed itself to an almost exclusively European definition, so that words like "cosmopolitan" were more or less interchangeable with "European". Said does not mention—maybe it does not

occur to him—that the true and most significant inheritors of Anquetil-Duperron's "triumphant eclecticism" were not Europeans, but Orientals; that it was they who took fullest intellectual and artistic advantage not only of the advent of Europe in their consciousness, as they did, but of the fact of the "Orient," the "correction," and "expansion" of "the old humanism of the Mediterranean basin." It is in this context that we must situate the importance of Tagore, born roughly eighty years after Anquetil-Duperron's translation of the Upanishads, in 1861, and indeed, that of Said, as one of the latest in that line of Orientals appropriating and complicating Anquetil-Duperron's inheritance.

"A nineteenth-century Orientalist was therefore either a scholar… or a gifted enthusiast… or both," says Said, after pointing out that "there was a virtual epidemic of Orientalia affecting every major poet, essayist, and philosopher of the period… this is a later transposition eastwards of a similar enthusiasm in Europe for Greek and Latin antiquity during the High Renaissance" (51). But the resemblance with the Renaissance ends there. The Orient, in Europe, continued to remain the province of arcane scholars and gifted enthusiasts; in the realm of culture, it retained, and still does, the ethos of "Orientalia." Unlike Greek and Latin antiquity, which becomes an indispensable resource and even a romantic myth for modernism, the Orient, with a handful of exceptions, such as the final lines of *The Waste Land*, is never inserted into modernist self-consciousness. Its domain becomes, in Europe, largely the domain of popular culture, of kitsch and the exotic. Even in nineteenth-century Indian art, the Orient occupies the soft, hazy space of "Orientalia" in popular artists like Ravi Varma; indeed, the Oriental paintings—the faux Mughal miniatures—of Tagore's nephew Abanindranath, often seen to be the father of modern Indian painting, have their lifeblood, partly, in the kitschy, the popular. This is not to make a value judgment about one sort of artist, or art, and another, but to try to map the moment and to be as true as possible to its impetus. It would have been easy enough for Tagore to turn, as a poet and writer, to the Orient as a magical and occult resource, as Yeats did, in some of his writings, with Ireland. Instead, radically, he inscribed it, in his vast oeuvre, into the trajectory of humanism and the "high" modern; Easternness, in his work, is no longer incompatible with individualism, with the self-consciousness about the powers and limits of language, or the awareness of the transformative role of the secular artist. In fashioning these paradigms, modes of consciousness, and roles for himself, Tagore seems to be addressing, instructing, and even rebutting not a Brahmin, but a bourgeois, orthodoxy in Calcutta and, unprecedentedly, conflating his identity as an Oriental and his vocation as a secular artist in doing so.

By the time Tagore was born in 1861, the first wave of Orientalist enthusiasm and the most significant phase of Orientalist scholarship were over. In 1813, Byron had advised Thomas Moore, "Stick to the East… it [is] the only poetical policy." The "policy" had impelled him, Southey, and Moore to write about the *gul-e-bulbul* (the stock Persian metaphor for the nightingale in the garden), and probably also stimulated Edward Fitzgerald's "translation" of the Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayam. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the excitement, despite the appearance of Max Mueller, had largely passed. (T. S. Eliot's misgiving about

Fitzgerald's poem, despite his not being immune to its appeal, is representative of modernism's distrust of "Orientalia." How Tagore escaped, albeit briefly, this distrust, with the help of Pound, of all people, is not easy to understand, and I'll return to it later.)

In 1879, "Oriental" poetry received a final fillip with the publication of *Light of Asia*, Edwin Arnold's life of the Buddha in narrative verse. As early as 1817, Thomas Moore had received the unheard-of sum of 3,000 guineas as an advance for his poem *Lalla Rookh*; now, once more, *Light of Asia* became an immense success on both sides of the Atlantic and was reprinted eighty times. When Matthew Arnold visited America, he found he was confused by many with Edwin. Of course, the notion of "high seriousness" that Matthew Arnold had himself formulated would prevail upon the culture of the time, guaranteeing that his reputation would outlast the frenetic but essentially light efflorescence of the "Oriental" poem; here, too, in the contrast between the two Arnolds, we are reminded that "seriousness" in literature remained a European or Anglo-Saxon province, and the "Oriental" was marked by lightness, color, and momentary success. The matter of success in the marketplace (one of the first things we associate with a certain kind of Indian writing today) and its relationship to the Orient has a lineage then, stretching back to the early nineteenth century.

The example of the Tagore family shows us that, in Calcutta itself, the creation of a space for culture had everything to do with a humanistic embracing of "high seriousness," and a turning away from commerce and material reward: the same turn that marks the emergence of modernism in the bourgeois cultures of Europe. Tagore's grandfather, "Prince" Dwarkanath, was a man who made his fortune out of the opportunity the colonial moment presented him with, as a middleman for the Company in Calcutta. He travelled to London and threw lavish parties; he died with his financial affairs in disarray. The disarray—not to speak of the vast estates—was inherited by his son Debendranath, who paid off his father's debts and made his family financially secure again. But the turn away from commerce and entrepreneurship (if not from inherited land) that would come to characterize middle-class or *bhadralok* Bengali culture already marks Debendranath, who, besides being a man of property, became a philosopher–mystic—"maharshi" or "maha rishi," the "great sage". What facilitated Debendranath's increasing philosophical leanings was his discovery of the Upanishads—a text that his father's friend, the scholar, reformer, and thinker Rammohun Roy had translated into English in the early nineteenth century, and which Anquetil-Duperron, too, had brought to the world's attention in the eighteenth century in his French translation. The Upanishads, then, became, for both Roy and Debendranath Tagore, a prism through which they recovered not only their own spiritual inheritance, but the lineage of a humanism to be found outside the Mediterranean basin.

The break with commerce that Debendranath represented was deepened emphatically and with finality in the next generation, especially by two of his fourteen children: Jyotirindranath, his fifth son, and Rabindranath, the youngest. (Tagore's biographers, Andrew Robinson and Krishna Dutta, have noted shrewdly that, although the poet speaks constantly of his father in his memoirs and

elsewhere, he elides the subject of his grandfather Dwarkanath.) Jyotirindranath, with his experimentations in theater, literature, and especially musical composition (in the 1870s and 1880s he was composing Bengali songs on the piano), was a great influence on Rabindranath, as was Jyotirindranath's young wife, with whom he had an ambiguous relationship: part familial, part romantic, the sort of semi-articulate bond that animates many of his fictions and especially his songs, a bond that almost thrives on the permanent impossibility of consummation.

> I could speak to her on a day like this,
> on a day when it rains as heavily.
> You can open your heart on a day like this –
> when you hear the clouds as the rain pours down
> in gloom unbroken by light.
> Those words won't be heard by anyone else;
> there's not a soul around.
> Just us, face to face, in each other's sorrow
> sorrowing, as water streams without interruption;
> it's as if there's no one else in the world (Amit Chaudhuri, 344).

These, the first two verses of a song, echo, with their promise of secrecy and revelation, what Tagore wrote to Kadambari in the concluding piece in a collection of jottings and musings published not long before her death:

> I offer something more with these thoughts, which only you will notice. Do you remember that moment by the banks of the Ganga? That silent dark? Those wanderings in imagined worlds? Those deep discussions in low, serious voices? The two of us sitting silently, saying nothing? That breeze at sunrise, that evening shadow! And, once, those rain-bearing clouds, Sravan's downpour, the songs of Vidyapati?…I have concealed a handful of contentment and grief in these thoughts; open these pages once in a while and look upon them with affection, no one but you will be able to see what's in them! The message inscribed into these words is – there's one writing that you and I shall read. And there's another writing for everyone else. (My translation)

These three—Jyotirindranath, Kadambari, and Rabindranath—formed, along with certain gifted members of a subsequent generation, the core of what was probably India's first "artistic" family: "artistic" in the sense of self-consciously pursuing the arts as a vocation, with a quasi-religious Victorian fervor, while moving away from, as self-consciously, the preordained responsibilities defined by caste, class, property, and even gender. This salon—at once embarrassing, silly, and deeply creative and original—and Tagore's part in it were permanently shadowed by Kadambari's suicide in 1884. The reasons for it are unclear, though speculations range from her attachment to Rabindranath, who was married a few months before she took her life by consuming opium, to her husband Jyotirindranath's flirtation, possibly liaison, with an actress he came into contact with during his forays into theater, and whose letters Kadambari discovered in his pocket; again, a scene retold in the novel *Chokher Bali*.

Part of the immediate legacy bestowed on Tagore by his father Debendranath was that of the Brahmo Samaj, the reformist sect within Hinduism founded by Rammohun Roy. The sect developed a curious but compelling mixture of Protestant high-mindedness and Hindu metaphysics; its prayers and meetings were conducted in a "church"; its central text was the Upanishads. In rejecting the

idolatrous practises and the deities of ordinary Hinduism and replacing them with the *niraakar* (formless) one of the Upanishads, Brahmoism supplied Tagore not so much with a religion—he was never entirely convinced by, or interested in, its claims to being one—as an aesthetic. It was an aesthetic that corresponds closely with the Flaubertian dictum that would define a substantial part of the modernist enterprise: "The author, like God in the universe, is everywhere present but nowhere visible in his works." This is a notion of God and his relationship to creation that goes to the heart of Brahmoism's vision of the world. Indeed, you have to wonder if Flaubert had been reading Anquetil-Duperron and had aestheticized an Upanishadic idea. Certainly, Tagore *did* perform that aestheticization in his own work, introducing to Bengali literature a new sort of self-reflexivity as he did so; seldom referring to God in his writings, but speaking of the "kabi" or "poet" while referring to both author and divinity, and punning on the word "rachana," or "composition," to mean both text and creation.

Tagore's education was an unusual one. Admitted to the Normal School at a "tender age," he was deeply unhappy there and was mainly educated at home by tutors. His least favorite lesson was English, and he pokes fun at the language in *Jiban Smriti*, his memoirs: "Providence, out of pity of mankind, has instilled a soporific charm into all tedious things. No sooner did our English lessons begin than our heads began to nod" (*My Reminiscences* 44). Later, in 1878, when his first book of songs appeared, he would go to England to study law, attend lectures for a few months at University College London, travel through the country and observe English culture (his remarks on Western music are particularly interesting) with a mixture of empathy and resistance, and finally return to Calcutta in 1880, without a degree. Tagore, like Kipling, his younger contemporary, was secretly traumatized by what Foucault called the "disciplinarian" society: the cluster of institutions comprising schools, universities, hospitals, prisons. The trauma, strangely, ended up making Kipling an official spokesman for the disciplinarian society; but Tagore always remained ill at ease in it. Not just his opposition to imperial England, but his suspicion of nationalism and the nation-state seem to derive from it; as does his fanciful experiment in a more open and relaxed form of learning in a place he wistfully chose to name "Shantiniketan." From childhood onward, Tagore had been looking out of windows and partitions; the word "*khancha*," or "cage," recurs in the songs and poems, as do the possibilities and avenues of egress that victims of a disciplinarian society fantasize about—"*batayan"* or window; "*kholo dwar*," the exhortation to open doors; the famous speculation at the end of a poem about the flight of wild geese, "*hethha noi, hethha noi, onno kothhay*," "not here, not here, but elsewhere"(Amit Chaudhuri, *Foreword* xxx).

When Tagore published his first book of songs at the age of 16, he was praised by the foremost writer of the time, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. But his relationship with Bengali literary culture was no means easy. Although he was probably Bengal's foremost poet by the end of the nineteenth century, he had several vociferous detractors (among them contemporaries like the poet D. L. Roy), whose comments on his work ranged from the snidely witty to the piously outraged. Even after the Nobel, which he got in 1913, the passages in which Tagore had begun

to write a new colloquial Bengali prose were included by Calcutta University in the MA paper in Bengali as specimens to be rendered by examinees into "chaste Bengali." The Nobel itself was the climax of a series of meetings and accidents. On board a ship to England in 1912, Tagore had completed his translations of the metrically strict but delicately agile Bengali songs of his *Gitanjali* into loose English prose poems with a hint of Biblical sonority: "The pages of a small exercise-book came gradually to be filled, and with it in my pocket I boarded the ship" (Datta and Robinson, *Selected Letters* 117). Once in London, Tagore lost the attaché case in which he was carrying the manuscripts on the Underground, but rediscovered it in the Left Luggage Office: a tribute to British civic sense, and possibly a reminder that the case contained nothing that would be of use to anyone. He gave the translations to the painter William Rothenstein, a friend of his nephew Abanindranath's, who had met Tagore in the winter of 1910–1911 in the house in Jorasanko, Calcutta. Rothenstein had then been intrigued by both Tagore's presence and his silence during conversations; not knowing of his reputation as a writer, his curiosity grew when he happened to read a story by Tagore in Calcutta's *Modern Review*. Rothenstein was astonished and immensely moved by the translations in the *Gitanjali* (the English *Gitanjali* does not quite correspond to its Bengali counterpart, but also contains a selection from two other books of songs); he showed them to Yeats. The Irish poet seems to have responded to them as business executives are reported to respond to Paul Coelho: "I have carried the manuscripts of these translations about with me for days, reading it in railway trains, or on the top of omnibuses and in restaurants, and I have often had to close it lest some stranger would see how much it moved me" (Datta and Robinson, *Myriad-Minded Man* 166).

Why Tagore translated the songs into a language he had once found so tedious, and which he used with a degree of insecurity ("That I cannot write English is such a patent fact that I never had even the vanity to feel ashamed of it," he confessed to his niece Indira) (Datta and Robinson, *Selected Letters* 117), is mysterious. Also mysterious is how they excited and even instructed, albeit for a relatively short while, the most exacting figures of literary London, Ezra Pound included. The English *Gitanjali* is a shadowy approximation of the marvelous original; if it continues to be of interest, it is for cultural and even psychological, not literary, reasons—and the same is true, as it happens, of the "Orient." The writers who had once promoted Tagore went off him not long after he got the Nobel in 1913; in 1917, Pound wrote in a letter: "Tagore got the Nobel Prize because, after the cleverest boom of our times, after the fiat of the omnipotent literati of distinction, he lapsed into religion and was boomed by the pious non-conformists" (Pound and Piage 106). The word "boom" is striking; the economist Amartya Sen, in his recent book *The Argumentative Indian*, seems to pick up that word and both recall and refute Pound when, speaking of Tagore's reputation, he places it within the logic of capital and the free market by saying it was a victim of the "boom and bust" cycle that most Oriental enthusiasms constitute in the West (96). Tagore's star waned irrevocably in the Occident; or at least the Oriental Tagore's did—the humanist Tagore's star had never appeared in that firmament.

The question of what happened to that humanist legacy returns to us briefly, but urgently, with recent translations such as the *Oxford Tagore Translations* and *The Essential Tagore*. These are evidence of a fresh attempt to assuage the anxiety that Tagore has seldom been well translated, least of all by himself, and to allay the fear that he cannot be. But the nature of the "bad" Tagore translation has not only to do with insufficient fidelity to the original, or inadequate mastery of the target language; it is do with a naïve and specious spirituality or Easternness in the English version that is present in the original in complex and oblique ways. The "bad" translations, including Tagore's own, insert Tagore into "Orientalia". These newer translations, then, are themselves late instances of the sort of humanist project that Tagore, in large measure, began in Bengal in the late nineteenth century, his emphatic rejection of Orientalia in Bengali, despite his slipping dangerously close to it in English, his situating of the Oriental in the human and universal, and vice versa. These translations then are an attempt to capture and be true to this process, of the way in which Easternness, in Tagore's oeuvre (and, implicitly, in those of us—his editors, translators, readers—for whom Tagore is a formative inheritance), becomes so integrally a part of the narrative of the human: till then largely the domain of the West. That the editors and translators do not always seem fully conscious of the process they embody reminds us how quickly and deeply that conflation of the Oriental with the universal was internalized among Indian moderns, while its features remain only sketchily delineated in critical language.

How, in creating his oeuvre and opening up the possibilities of a new tradition—a modern literature in India—did Tagore position himself as a modern? His view of himself, expressed in and across his essays, is that he is an Oriental, bringing to bear upon the modern world the special insight of the Oriental; that he is a Bengali, having recourse to the emotional terrain of Bengal; and that, as a poet, he is a "universal" human being, with access to a humanity that is deeper than civilizational borders, or conflicts, or even the fact of colonization. Each one of these personae (for the want of a better word) is assumed by Tagore at different points of time, and developed and pursued according to the appropriateness of the moment or the argument, without any sense of self-contradiction or confusion or embarrassment. By European modernism itself, represented to him mainly by the early T. S. Eliot and his urban despair in poems such as "Preludes," he was deeply distressed, but nevertheless studied it dutifully, if balefully. Here, he positioned himself as an Oriental who, implicitly, brought a far more profound response to life than Eliot's shallow (as Tagore saw it) urban angst. Tagore's rejection of Eliot and the decaying industrialized city of modernism led younger poets and admirers like Buddhadev Bose (who had a long, eloquent debate with him on the subject not long before his death in 1941) to classify Tagore as probably something of a late romantic—as someone not quite modern. It is an impression that persists even today; as if a rejection of modernity as subject matter—tenement housing, electric lights, offices, scenes of urban dereliction—were itself an infallible sign of a distance from modernism; as if the fact that Tagore claimed Indian antiquity as a great part of his intellectual inheritance, and invoked nature repeatedly in songs and poems, marked him simply and uncomplicatedly as a romantic.

In listening to these criticisms, Tagore was exceptionally patient; and yet, while officially stating his reservations about the modernists and about Eliot (with the exception of "Journey of the Magi," which he was greatly moved by), and his disagreements with Bose, he was also studying and taking cues from them. Tagore was an astonishingly shrewd and gifted learner; and the topoi and characteristics of much of his work of his middle and late periods—the experiments in fragmentary and free verse; the appearance of the lower-middle-class city in a poems like "Banshi" or "Flute"; the unfinished and provisional quality of much of the late poems and especially the paintings—are partly the irresolvable marks of what Edward Said called "late style," and partly a working out of Tagore's problematic relationship with stimuli he felt compelled to reject, and yet could not ignore. Very few modern poets, except Yeats, have aged as intriguingly as Tagore; very few, in age, continued to be such gifted, if often recalcitrant students, while appearing to the world as a master.

Yet it would be a mistake to impose a dichotomy on Tagore's work, between the modern, the political, the "critical," on the one hand, and the romantic, the ahistorical, the organic on the other, as two of the most intelligent critics of Bengali culture, Buddhadev Bose in the Forties, and, more recently, Dipesh Chakrabarty have done. It is a dichotomy that Tagore seems to invite and to confirm in his own pronouncements, but which his work dismantles profoundly. For Bose, and others after him, Tagore's turning away from the crises of modernity—urban squalor, man's alienation from the industrialized landscape—distinguishes him decisively from the modernists. Bose's idea of the modern, as of Bengali critics after him who have written about Tagore and modernity, seems to have its source in Eliot's essay on Baudelaire. Tagore's late poem "Banshi," about a clerk (modernism's "little man") who lives in a squalid tenement in Calcutta, is seen, then, to be an attempt by the poet to come to terms with the Baudelarian inheritance and milieu of modernism (quoted in Chakrabarty, 164–168). But this is to identify modernism by theme alone and ignore the radical revisions in forms of perception that it constitutes. Two of the fundamental preoccupations of the modernist imagination, the moment in time as a means of accessing the transformed present, and the image, which cannot be entirely broken down or reduced, are both integral to Tagorean poetics and his view of the world—the moment, in his work, is "*kshan*," and the image "*chhabi*," or "picture," and they recur in his poems, especially in his songs, in an infinity of contexts.

"Banshi," as it happens, is a romantic poem about modernity; but the so-called romantic songs about the weather, the beloved, and nature are replete with the modernist's fragmentary apprehension of the real and of the irreducible image.

Chakrabarty, in an essay on Tagore, distinguishes the poet's "critical eye," which he finds in his stories, and which, for Chakrabarty, negotiates history and society, from the sensibility, or gaze, found in the poetry, which he describes as the "adoring eye": romantic, transcendent, bucolic. A "division of labor" is at work here, and this is how Chakrabarty puts it:

> At the same time…as he employed his prosaic writings to document social problems, Tagore put his poetic compositions (not always in verse), and songs to a completely different use. These created and deployed images of the same category – the Bengali village – but this time as a land of arcadian and pastoral beauty overflowing with the sentiments that defined what Tagore would increasingly – from the 1880s on – call "the Bengali heart" (153).

This is true; and yet, to get a fuller sense of the impact nature had on Tagore, and the one it has on us through his writing, we have to take into account the long and intriguing itinerary it had in his intellectual development. In fact, Tagore's natural world, in the songs and poems, has little of the finished repose of arcadia, but is beset by continual physical agitation, either subtle—tremors, tricks of light—or violent and Shelleyan, as in the famous poem about the flight of the wild geese in the collection *Balaka*. But the conception of nature Tagore theorized in his essays all his mature life is arcadian, and that arcadian conception is not incompatible with Tagore's politics, but is actually indispensable to it. That arcadia is India, or ancient India, and its source and mediator is Kalidasa. That notional arcadia has a deceptive tranquility; for Tagore, nature is as much a political metaphor, an instrument for national contestation, as it is for John Clare and Ted Hughes. Critics such as Tom Paulin and Mina Gorji have drawn our attention to the ways in which nature becomes a metaphor for an embattled "Englishness" in Clare and Hughes; the unfinished "naturalness" of nature is conflated with the "rude" qualities of Northern speech or English dialect, and set, implicitly, against the refined and false graces of Southern England and of the court and the city. So, as Paulin points out, the thistles in Hughes's poem of the same name become "a grasped fistful/Of splintered weapons and Icelandic frost thrust up/From the underground stain of a decayed Viking' (quoted in Paulin 265). The thistles, in the poem, enact the contestation over what Englishness, and English speech, constitute: "They are like… the gutturals of dialect;" mown down, their "sons appear, /Stiff with weapons, fighting back over the same ground" (265).

Tagore's deployment of nature in his politics and aesthetics is as ideological as Hughes's and has equally to do with nationality; but it moves in the opposite direction, critiquing imperialism while overturning the verities that we have now come to associate with post-colonial writing and identity. If Tagore were to fit in with our stock idea of the post-colonial writer, he would have enlisted the wildness of nature, of the indigenous landscape, as a trope of resistance against European civilization and the Enlightenment. Instead, for Tagore, nature is the site of civilization, refinement, and of certain ideals of the secular Enlightenment, such as the ideal of living in harmony with the world: and it is a specifically Indian location for these things. Tagore, audaciously, not so much critiques the Western Enlightenment and humanism, and the idea of "civilization" itself, but snatches them away from their expected location and gives to them another source and lineage in India and its antiquity; cheekily, he implies this lineage might be the more authentic one. Here, both nature and Kalidasa—for him, the ur-poet of the physical world—are crucial to his purposes. Tagore's engagement with Kalidasa is all the more astonishing when we think of Chakrabarty's honest, if remorseful, admission that modern Indian intellectuals are unable to enter into a fruitful dialogue with their forbears; for the dialogue Tagore has with Kalidasa is not just instinctive and emotional, but pressing and contemporary. We begin to understand, as we read him theorizing about nature and the Sanskrit poet, the radically revisionist nature of his project—not only to insert the Orient into Western humanism, but to subsume the more true, the more humane, tradition of humanism under the Orient. Toward the end of an essay,

"The Religion of the Forest," Tagore reflects on two broad, and conflicting, civilizational impulses:

> When, in my recent voyage to Europe, our ship left Aden and sailed along the sea which lay between the two continents, we passed by the red and barren rocks of Arabia on our right side and the gleaming sands of Egypt on our left. They seemed to me like two giant brothers exchanging with each other burning glances of hatred, kept apart by the tearful entreaty of the sea from whose womb they had their birth (*Creative Unity* 60).

For Tagore, "the two shores spoke to me of two different historical dramas enacted." In Egypt, he sees a civilization that grew around a "noble river, which spread the festivities of life on its banks across the heart of the land. There man never raised the barrier of alienation between himself and the rest of the world." On the other hand, on "the opposite shore of the Red Sea the civilization which grew up in the inhospitable soil of Arabia had a contrary character to that of Egypt. There man felt himself isolated in hostile and bare surroundings." And so, his mind "naturally dwelt upon the principle of separateness. It roused in him the spirit of fight, and this spirit was a force that drove him far and wide." For Tagore, these "two civilizations represented two fundamental divisions of human nature. The one contained in it the spirit of conquest and the other the spirit of harmony." Tagore concludes that "both of these have their truth and purpose in human nature" (61).

It's clear, however, which side Tagore is on, and what the purpose of this elaborate meditation is. "Egypt" is a trope for the Orient, "Arabia" for the colonizer, and, therefore, by extension, of the West. (Tagore is not the first Indian poet to view the Arab as a "conqueror"; Henry Vivian Derozio, an important but comparatively minor figure of the early nineteenth century, does the same (R. Chaudhuri, 44–45). It is something they inherited from the work of the early British Orientalists; but since both Derozio and, here, Tagore turned the Arab into a covert trope for the English colonizer, it is something they also turn against the people they inherited it from.) That Tagore means the English colonizer is left in no doubt if one looks at the textual analysis that he undertakes in most of this essay, a comparison between literary responses to nature in English and in Sanskrit. The English works mainly comprise Shakespeare, who is found wanting: "In the *Tempest*, through Prospero's treatment of Ariel and Caliban we realise man's struggle with Nature and his longing to sever connection with her" (*Creative Unity* 57). In *Macbeth*, all we evidently get of the non-human world is a "barren heath where the three witches appear as personifications of Nature's malignant forces" (57); in *King Lear*, "the storm on the heath" is a symbol of the human tumult enacted in the play. Moreover, the "tragic intensity of *Hamlet* and *Othello* is unrelieved by any touch of Nature's eternity" (57). Tagore glances at play after play, before judiciously washing his hands of both the English poet and the culture he belongs to: "I hope it is needless for me to say that these observations are not intended to minimise Shakespeare's great power as a dramatic poet but to show in his works the gulf between Nature and human nature owing to the tradition of his race and time" (58). Not even Milton is exempt; although the "very subject" of *Paradise Lost* "—Man dwelling in the garden of Paradise—seems to afford a special opportunity for bringing out the true greatness of man's relationship with Nature" (58), Tagore detects a disturbing

element of mastery in Milton's account of that relationship: "Bird, beast, insect or worm /Durst enter none, such was their awe of man" (59).

As Tagore reads these poets, he seems to argue that Western humanism—and its idea of "civilization"—is complicated, and compromised, by its compulsion to dominate and colonize nature. It is a conclusion remarkably similar to D. H. Lawrence's *Etruscan Places*; Lawrence's metaphors for colonizer and colonized are the Romans and the Etruscans, respectively, where the former's civilization is marked by territorial conquest and the domination of nature, the latter's by its investment in agricultural and spiritual regeneration (10–12). Extraordinarily, in his essay, Tagore notes a particular break in the English imagination after the Renaissance with the advent of Romanticism; the break is characterized by a new relationship to nature, a new definition of the human, and its source, Tagore claims, is the Orient: "We observe a completely different attitude of mind in the later English poets like Wordsworth and Shelley, which can be attributed in the main to the great mental change in Europe, at that particular period through the influence of the newly discovered philosophy of India which stirred the soul of Germany and aroused the attention of other Western countries" (58).

Tagore, in spite of his use of the word "philosophy," is not so much thinking of Max Mueller, Schiller, Schelling, and German Indology here, but of nature and poetry, of Kalidasa, and of Goethe's enthusiasm for the *Shakuntala*. This is more than Tagore's version of what Schwab called the "correction and expansion of the old humanism of the Mediterranean basin"; it is a wresting of the humanist and civilizational initiative from the West. Tagore, then, is not as interested in critiquing the Western Enlightenment in the now-familiar post-colonial manner, as he is in relocating its original impetus in the Orient and in India. This relocation, of course, was an obsession with a branch of Orientalist scholarship, and with figures like William Jones; but, while the Orientalists were content to discern certain features of the Enlightenment in Indian antiquity, Tagore wants to trace a lineage from antiquity to modernity, from Kalidasa to, specifically, himself, and to use that lineage to rebuff the colonizer. For these purposes, Kalidasa and Shakespeare and their imaginative relationships with nature continue to be contrasted strategically by Tagore; his own advocacy of Kalidasa is also shrewd and strategic, besides being passionate.

At the time Tagore was writing, traditional Indian literature was seen (as it still is sometimes) to be almost indistinguishable from mythology and religion; Tagore himself, although his own poetry and imagination were radically secular, was translated as a public figure into the realm of mythology and mysticism, partly because of this reason, and partly through his own connivance. Yet the nature of his engagement with Kalidasa tells us of a very different concern, a different agenda, which also brings him much closer to the modernist preoccupation (prevalent in Europe at the time) with exactness, concreteness, and sensory perception than one would ordinarily think. The reasons for Tagore more or less ignoring, as a practising poet, the influence of his immediate as well as not-too-distant precursors in Bengal, such as the devotional poets Chandidas and Vidyapati (except in a youthful pastiche he did of the latter's work), and turning to a North

Indian Sanskrit poet of antiquity are manifold. In claiming Kalidasa as a precursor, Tagore is seeing him as a proto-modern, as someone whose primary subject was the physical universe, unmediated by religion, and whose primary concern was language itself, and its ability to convey and enrich ways of seeing. The devotional poets of India referred to the physical world—to the landscape and to the weather—in stock images that circulated in their work; one would expect, then, that Tagore learnt to "look" at the real world from the English Romantics he admired. Tagore is aware of this and is at pains to tell us that he learnt it from Kalidasa, from whom, too, according to Tagore, the Romantics inherited, consciously or indirectly, the habit of looking at the world. It is no accident, surely, that the lines Tagore quotes from Kalidasa in his essay, "The Meghadutam," about Kalidasa's great poem sequence, not so much invoke tradition as much as contemporariness: they are lines in which perception, memory, and immediate physical sensation have come together in a single moment and image and are quite unlike anything in Chandidas or Vidyapati: "The breezes from the snowy peaks have just burst open the leaf-buds of deodar trees and, redolent of their oozing resin, blow southward. I embrace those breezes, fondly imagining they have lately touched your form, O perfect one!" (Chaudhuri, Ghosha, and Das 223).

Kalidasa is crucial to Tagore's revisionist notion that a fundamental strain of Enlightenment humanism—the idea that the individual fashions and reorders his relationship to the physical universe through language—is more authentically Indian, or Oriental, than European. As a colonial subject, Tagore would have known that, ever since James Mill wrote his contemptuous diatribe on the Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the common English view of Indian writing was that it was overblown, grotesquely overwritten, and excessively romantic. In Mill's words:

> These fictions are not only extravagant, and unnatural, less correspondent with the physical and moral laws of the universe, but are less ingenious, more monstrous and have less of any thing that can engage the affection, or excite admiration… Of the style in which they are composed it is far from too much to say, that all the vices which characterise the style of rude nations… they exhibit in perfection. Inflation; metaphors perpetual, and these the most violent and strained… repetition; verbosity; confusion, incoherence; distinguished the Mahabharat and the Ramayan (52).

Through Kalidasa, Tagore wishes to show his readers that classicism—refinement and obliqueness in language; impersonality in perception—is not only native to India, but has older roots there than in Europe. In another, brilliant essay on Kalidasa, in which he compares *Shakuntala* to the *Tempest*, Tagore turns Mill's rhetoric upon Shakespeare, claiming, in effect, Hellenic classicism as an essentially Oriental literary characteristic, and Orientalizing, in Said's sense of the word, Shakespeare and the European poets:

> Universal nature is outwardly serene, but a tremendous force works continually within it. In Shakuntala we can see an image of this state. No other drama exhibits such remarkable restraint. European poets seem to grow wild at the least chance of displaying the force of nature and impulse. They love to bring out, through hyperbolic utterance, how far our impulses can lead us. Examples aplenty can be found in plays like Shakespeare's

> *Romeo and Juliet*. Among all Shakespeare's dramatic works, there is no play as serenely profound, as restrainedly complete and perfect as *Shakuntala*. Such love dialogue as passes between Dushyanta and Shakuntala is very brief, and chiefly conveyed through hints and signs…. Precisely where another poet would have looked for a chance to let the pen race, [Kalidasa] quells it (Chaudhuri, Ghosha, and Das 249).

Reading Tagore's essays on Kalidasa, one feels that he is trying, in recuperating the Sanskrit court poet, to do in the realm of literature what Rammohun Roy and his own father Debendranath had done not very much earlier in the realm of religion and philosophy. Faced with the charge that the Hindu religion was incorrigibly polytheistic, these figures, instead of rejecting the European humanism from which that charge emanated, turned to ancient texts like the Upanishads to claim that, in a sense, the Enlightenment had an older lineage in India than it did in Europe. The story of that Indian rewriting of humanism would not be complete without an acknowledgment of how Tagore enlarged it in the field of literature; for him, and for the narrative of Indian literature in the context of humanism, Kalidasa and his arcadia is as significant and loaded with meaning as the discovery of the Upanishads was to the Brahmo Samaj, the reformist sect that Roy and Debendranath founded. "Universal nature is outwardly serene, but a tremendous force works continually within it": It is as if, in speaking of nature, Tagore actually means literature, and the politics of literature, as it appears to a man living in a momentous and turbulent time.

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Chapter 5
Tagore's Idea of "World Literature"

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Abstract This essay tries to position Rabindranath Tagore's little-known essay "Visva-Sahitya" (World Literature) in cross-cultural articulations of such an idea. Considering the circumstances leading to Tagore's text, it explores the origins of comparatist literary studies in eighteenth century Europe and to colonial context in India. The attempt is to locate Tagore's ideas of the world literature in the wider circulation of texts across different cultural milieus and the webs of power within which such texts are situated. Though Tagore comes to the world literature only at the end, his essay is an important statement of his view of man, the purpose of human life, and the role of art in its fruition; indeed, we might consider the essay to be a concise formulation of Tagore's esthetic philosophy itself. What Tagore meant by the world literature was the essential unity of human experience and therefore of human creativity. But more than that, it signified to him the ever-evolving, never-complete edifice of the best and most authentic expression of human creativity, fashioned by so many hands, spread in so many parts of the world, but still part of the one narrative of the human race. He also believed that we reveal ourselves in the literature more profoundly than in mundane activities of self-interest and self-preservation. Moreover, it is only by giving ourselves to others that we can know or express ourselves. Such self-giving is effortless and joyous because in it lies the realization of our own nature. Everywhere, the universe revels in such joyous self-giving which exceeds any functional requirement or necessity. It is this plenitude or surplus that is beautiful and joyous; the artist in his self-giving is thus a part of a fundamental tendency of nature itself. We may call this the surplus value of art theory that Tagore believed in and which he enunciates so eloquently in this essay.

Keywords Literary theory · Comparative literature · World literature · Romanticism · Pedagogy · Modernity · Visva-Sahitya · Civilization studies

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In 1907, Rabindranth Tagore, India's greatest literary genius of the present epoch, was invited to deliver a lecture to the newly established Jatiya Shiksha Parishad (National Council of Education). This body had been formed in the previous year with the specific aim of offering an alternative to the colonial system of education. Many famous patriots leant their support to this initiative including Sri Aurobindo, who in 1906, became the first Principal of the National College formed under its auspices. Tagore's topic was "Comparative Literature." Interestingly, he spoke very little directly relating to his topic. But at the end of the talk, he made a startling declaration: "The topic that I have been entrusted to discuss has been titled 'Comparative Literature' by you in English. In Bangla I shall call it 'World Literature' [Visva-Sahitya]."[1]

It is interesting how this essay has recently come up for mention during Tagore's global sesquicentennial anniversary celebrations. Not only did the occasion result in a flurry of activities around the world, but also dozens of interesting reminiscences and reflections, reinforcing the continuing significance of the poet's life and work. One such was reportedly by the eminent post-colonialist–feminist critic, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, in her informal talk at her alma mater, Lady Brabourne College, Kolkata.[2] Spivak recalls how she, along with her best college friend, sang Tagore's songs on numerous occasions, during her coming of age years. There was a song for every occasion and function, chosen from a list of popular numbers, birthdays, celebration of festivals, partings, deaths, and farewells. Reading *Shesher Kobita* and singing Rabindra Sangeet was thus a way a whole generation grew up, a pattern which, with a few variations continues even today. Summing up this sort of influence, Spivak observes, "This is my Tagore, giving soul-shape to middle class women." Spivak goes on to speak of Tagore's value to literary critics like herself, which is to re-emphasize the significance of the arts and humanities in a world that is increasingly driven by profit. It is Tagore who best articulates the "surplus value" theory of art, where the real function of art is beyond any immediate material gain:

> The world is in bad shape with the loss of emphasis on the humanities. This message of Tagore – that what goes across is not immediately profitable – is a hard lesson to learn in the face of the material ambition that at once drives and destroys our lives.

In making this point, Spivak refers in passing to "Visva-Sahitya," ("World Literature"), a "celebrated" essay, which is the subject of this paper, observing that here Tagore "theorizes the imaginative creative bond that travels across national

[1] All quotations from this text refer to the new translation by Rijula Das and Makarand R. Paranjape. Buddhadev Bose's summary of the same lines in Tagore's text is as follows: "I have been called upon to discuss a subject to which you have given the English name Comparative Literature. Let me call it World Literature in Bengali" (cited in Sisir Kumar Das 26). An earlier version was published in *Journal of Contemporary Thought* special number "Punctuated Renewals: Rabindranath Tagore in the 21st Century" edited by Debashish Banerji (cited in Paranjape M.R).

[2] These remarks of Spivak's are available on http://tagore150toronto.ca/gayatri-chakravorty-spivak-tagoretribute/ (accessed July 29, 2011).

boundaries as bajey khoroch–wasteful spending. A powerful metaphor for what in the imagination goes above beyond beneath and short of mere rational choice." This non-utilitarian, non-instrumental approach to art is so refreshing in our own times of budget cuts, rationalization, and the continuing attack on the humanities in the academy, where so often we are forced to serve merely as adjuncts or service departments to science, technology, or business, whose value is considered self-evident.

Given its importance, it is surprising that the essay was translated into English in full only quite recently and made available in Tagore's *Selected Writings on Literature and Language* first published in 2001. Though Tagore comes to world literature only in the end, the essay is an important statement of Tagore's view of man, the purpose of human life, and the role of art in its fruition; indeed, we might consider the essay to be a concise formulation of Tagore's aesthetic philosophy itself.[3] What Tagore meant by world literature was the essential unity of human experience and therefore of human creativity. But more than that it signified to him the ever-evolving, never-complete edifice of the best and most authentic expression of human creativity, fashioned by so many hands, spread in so many parts of the world, but still part of the one narrative of the human race. He also believed that we reveal ourselves in literature more profoundly than in mundane activities of self-interest and self-preservation. Moreover, it is only by giving ourselves to others that we can know or express ourselves. Such self-giving is effortless and joyous because in it lies the realization of our own nature. Everywhere, the universe revels in such joyous self-giving which exceeds any functional requirement or necessity. It is this plenitude or surplus that is beautiful and joyous; the artist in his self-giving is thus a part of a fundamental tendency of nature itself. We may call this the surplus value of art theory that Tagore believed in and which he enunciates so eloquently in this essay. Returning to the notion of world literature, Tagore contends that it is only in connecting with "everyone else in the broadest way" can we free ourselves: "man is breaking and re-making himself only to voice himself in the universal."

This speech of Tagore's was published early in 1907, as "Visva-Sahitya" or world literature, in a collection of essays called Sahitya. Literary scholars like

[3] As a companion piece to this essay, the entire text of Tagore's speech is provided in a new translation. The essay was published in an English translation in Sukanta Chaudhuri's edition of Tagore's Selected Writings on Literature and Language (2001: 138–150). Given its importance, we have tried to offer a new translation of the essay. In our translation, we have, for most part, retained the more accurate rendering of Tagore's words, which Swapan Chakravorty (Das and Chaudhuri 138–150) has often rendered into more idiomatic English paraphrase. Similarly, we have tried to retain Tagore's somewhat complicated syntax, rather than simplifying his sentences into "plain" English. We have also avoided gender neutral alterations, translating manush as "man" rather than "human" mostly because such usage was characteristic of Tagore's times. Tagore almost certainly included the woman in his notion of man, though in specifically speaking of woman in one section of his essay, he acknowledges that much of the other references referred to masculine roles and occupations; at the level of abstraction, then, "man" may be understood as human, but in its practical application, Tagore was quite aware of its gendered implications.

Buddhadev Bose were quick to seize on the importance of Tagore's pronouncements as the basis for a program in comparative literary studies. No surprise that this speech has been quoted both on the Web site of the first Comparative Literature department in India at Jadavpur University, which was founded by Bose, and in a few other important papers by other comparatists like the late Sisir Kumar Das. However, what is equally important to note is that they quote selectively from the essay, confining themselves to the last part. The whole essay has much wider ramifications and is of great significance in its own right. This, none of the previous scholars has effectively admitted or pointed out. They have glossed over the entire body of the speech to fix only upon its conclusion in which Tagore finally arrives at the topic he has been asked to speak on, which is "Comparative literature."

To understand the value and context of Tagore's comments we will, however, have to go back over a hundred years earlier to account for how such ideas of world literature may have actually originated in India, then left Indian shores, and once again returned to India in a complex pattern and history of circulation. To start exploring this journey at a key moment, let us turn to another great literary figure, of stature comparable to Tagore's, Wofgang von Goethe.[4] It is with him that the concept of world literature or weltliteratur is usually associated. The expression itself has had a charmed life. It is what Fritz Strich calls, a "magical term" which at once "brings to mind a feeling of liberation, of such gain in space and scope" (Strich 3). The term itself was coined in 1827 (Strich 160), though Goethe had been thinking along these lines earlier and continued to do so later. Moreover, as Strich clarifies, "at no point did Goethe himself unequivocally state what he wished to be understood by world literature" (5). Among Goethe's scattered remarks on the subject, the following are especially significant to my purpose today:

1. National literature is no longer of importance; it is the time for world literature, and all must aid in bringing it about (Gearey 224).
2. "Poetry is cosmopolitan, and the more interesting the more it shows its nationality" (Gearey 228); "only from a real nation can a national writer of the highest order be expected" (Spingrarn 84).
3. The world at large, no matter how vast it may be, is only an expanded homeland and will actually yield in interest no more than our native land.... The serious-minded must therefore form a silent, almost secret congregation, since it would be futile to oppose the powerful currents of the day (Gearey 227).
4. For it is evident that all nations, thrown together at random by terrible wars, then reverting to their status as individual nations, could not help realizing that they had been subject to foreign influences.... Instead of isolating themselves as before, their state of mind has gradually developed a desire to be included in the free exchange of ideas" (Gearey 228).

[4] Indeed Albert Schweitzer called Tagore "the Goethe of India" (Kripalani 295).

What we see from these remarks is both a visionary prediction of an emerging global culture as also the acknowledgment of a specific state of affairs emerging in Goethe's own time. As many critics have pointed out, however, Goethe's views were neither systematic nor fully developed. For Strich, Goethe's notion of world literature essentially meant "the choice literature which has gained for itself a significance transcending nationality and time" (4). He also identifies various other senses of the term such as:

> a link literature; the literature of/in translation; letters between authors of different nations; a branch of scholarship, especially comparative literature; and world poetry as the essence of world literature (Strich 5–16). This shows us the multiple, overlapping, and at times contrary meanings inherent in the term world literature.

I think it is advantageous to retain the plural possibilities of the term rather than trying to reduce it to any one coherent interpretation. In fact, I am more interested in tracing the origin of such ideas and how they might have reached Goethe. While Strich is at great pains to trace the European origins of Goethe's ideas ("Sources," 31–51, and "History" 52–80), Indian scholars such as R.K. Dasgupta and Sisir Kumar Das have preferred to argue that Goethe was responding to something quite unprecedented, namely the first serious encounter of the European mind with Eastern culture. This encounter happened not in Germany or Europe, but in India in the late eighteenth century after India's richest province, Bengal, came under British rule. As Dasgupta puts it:

> When Sir William Jones's English translation of Shakuntala appeared in 1789 Goethe was forty years of age. Forster 's German translation of Shakuntala appeared in 1791. Six years earlier, that is, in 1785, had appeared Charles Wilkins's English translation of the Bhagavadgita. Frederick Schlegel's The Language and Wisdom of India was published in 1808. Ten years after this, in 1818, Frederick Schlegel's brother A. W. Schlegel was appointed Professor of German at Bonn. Bopp's Analytical Comparison of the Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and Teutonic Languages appeared in 1816. Jayadeva's Gitagovinda was translated into English prose by Sir William Jones in 1789. (23–24)

The idea that Dasgupta tries to convey is that Europe and India were coming into contact in an unprecedented manner. For the first time, both sides could read a text from a distant land and period in the most fresh and contemporary manner. Literally, a new world of creative possibilities, a new cultural commonwealth was emerging. It was out of such ferment the notion of world literature was born.

As a consequence of this historic encounter, Europeans discovered both India's and Persia's classical literature. This literature was from a totally different civilization, but recognizably both ancient and not inferior to that of Europe. The first impact of such a discovery was so immense as to impel some scholars, such as Raymond Schwab, to call it "the Oriental renaissance," rivaling the earlier rediscovery of Greek and Latin texts during the European renaissance from the fourteenth century onwards. Indeed, the Oriental renaissance, which started with the discovery that the classical languages of the East such as Sanskrit and Persian were not only cognate, but also kin to Greek and Latin, did not stop here. Soon, its scope spread farther east to China and Japan, till a complete reassessment of the state of European knowledge about the rest of the world was underway.

It is, no doubt, true that much of these discoveries, far reaching and unprecedented as they might have been, were also tainted and smudged by the overwhelming fact of colonialism. Because of colonialism, the very lands and cultures whose ancient texts and traditions contributed to the birth of modern disciplines such as philology, linguistics, and anthropology in the West, indeed even playing an important role in the European Enlightenment itself, came to be devalued and dismissed due to ideological and political considerations. The demands and compulsions of imperialistic domination of subject peoples resulted in a tradition of misunderstanding and distortion of other cultures which we now have come to recognize, after Edward Said, under the rubric of Orientalism.

It should thus be evident that Goethe's thoughts on world literature were a part of the broader movement which we now know as German romanticism and which, as has been well-demonstrated, was deeply influenced by Indian classical texts translated in European languages. Goethe himself, as we know quite well, admired and was influenced by Kalidasa's Abijnanam Shakuntalam, one of the best known examples of Sanskrit literature. Goethe wrote his famous quatrain on Shakuntala in a letter to F.H. Jacob dated June 1, 1781:

> Wouldst thou the young year's blossoms and the fruits of its decline, And all by which the soul is charmed, enraptured, feasted, fed? Wouldst thou the earth and heaven itself in one sole name combine? I name thee, O Sakoontala! And all at once is said.
> (E. B. Eastwick's translation quoted in Dasgupta)

It is believed Goethe also derived the idea of the stage manager in Faust from that of the sutradhar, "the holder of the strings" of Sanskrit drama, the character who introduces the subject of a play and performs a function not unlike that of a Greek chorus. In his own masterpiece, Faust, he uses this device in the prologue where the theater director introduces the play (Cannon 313). Though Goethe's enthusiasm for things Indian waned with the years, that there was a distinctive Indian moment in German Romanticism of the eighteenth century cannot be denied. As is well-known, some of the leading literary and cultural figures of that time, such as Herder, Heine, August and Friedrich Schlegel, and others, were deeply influenced by India.

Almost fifty years before Goethe's comments on world literature, Warren Hastings, the Governor General of Bengal and a patron of classical Indian studies, wrote an introduction to Charles Wilkins' first translation of the Bhagawad Gita into English in 1785. This was an epochal act, the first translation into English of one of India's most famous texts. Interestingly, Hastings' Preface has been seen by Sisir Kumar Das as a plea for comparative literature:

> I should not fear to place, in opposition to the best French version of the most admired passages of Iliad or Odyssey, or the 1st and 6th books of our own Milton, highly as I venerate the latter, the English translation of the Mahabharata. (Cited in Das 22)

This statement, which has eluded the notice of most comparatists or world literature specialists, nevertheless, attracted the attention of the students of College of Fort William, in Calcutta, which had been set up to train British civil servants for their work in India. Das points out how several of these students not only went on

to become notable Orientalists, but also posed questions "relating to the problems of inter-literary relationship of divergent literary cultures" (Das 21). European tastes and ideas of canonicity were not challenged by the discovery of these Eastern texts, but were also inspired by the new possibilities that they posed. As H.H. Wilson, a well-known British scholar and Orientalist, said, in 1806, about the same playwright that Goethe admired:

> the work of Kaleedas [sic] unfolded now for the first time to such distant generations as our own displays of this uniformity in the characters and genius of our race which seems to write at once the most remote of regions of time and space, and which always gratifies the human mind to discern through the superficial varieties in which some slight difference of external or even intellectual fashions may even disguise it. In Kaleedas we find poetical design, a poetical description of Nature in all her forms, moral and material, poetical imagery, poetical inventions, just and natural feeling, with all the finer and keener sensibilities of the human heart. In these great and immutable features we recognize in Kaleedas, the fellow and kinsman of the great masters of ancient and modern Poetry. (Cited in Das 22–23)

The terms that Wilson uses to praise Kalidas are reminiscent of those Dr. Johnson employed to extol Britain's national bard, Shakespeare. In both what is found is a universality, both in feelings and values, and an accurate reflection of nature. Das calls this "one of the most significant pronouncements on the universality of letters defending the study of literature as a manifestation of the unifying spirit of human creativity" (23).

We must remember that such statements by colonial administrators and scholars appeared long before Goethe's idea of the possibility of world literature or the French literary historian Abel-François Villemain coined the term "Literature Comparé," which Matthew Arnold later adapted into English as "comparative literature" (Das 23). About 50 years after Wilson's statement, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, the well-known French literary critic and historian, would also make a similar plea to include Eastern masters in the history of world literature:

> Homer, as always and everywhere should be first, like a god, but behind him like a procession of three wise kings of the East, would be seen the three great poets, the three Homers, so long ignored by us, who wrote epics for the use of the old people of Asia, the poets Valmiki, Vyasa of the Hindus, and Firdousi of the Persians, in the domain of taste; it is well to know that such men exist and not to divide the human race. (Cited in Das 23)

The importance of the colonial space of discovery and interaction was, thus, an important contributor to later ideas of world literature. For example, the Fort William College also sponsored a translation of Virgil's Aeneid into Bengali so as to expose future Indian writers other models of composition than their own. Later in the century, another colonial scholar and Orientalist, this time working with the Southern classical language Tamil translated the Tirukural, one of its greatest ancient texts, into English in 1896. In his Introduction, he pointed out the similarities between the epigrammatic style of the ancient Tamil ethical treatise with what is found in classical Greek and Latin literature: "There is a beauty in the periodic character of the Tamil construction in many of these verses that reminds the reader of the happiest efforts of Properitus" (cited in Das 24). When he translated another

Tamil classic, the Tiruvasakam, in 1908, he invited his readers to compare its verses with those found in English religious poetry, declaring that "no literature can stand alone" (Das 24).

Not only did British Orientalists play a leading role in such early comparatism, Indian scholars and writers too seized the opportunity to read and respond to European literary models. Michael Madhusudan Dutt, an ambitious young man who dreamed of achieving fame as an English poet, failed to do so but achieved greater renown as the first Bangla modern poet. He wrote a new version of the epic Ramayan where, like Milton, he made the rakshasas or the demons, the heroes. He also introduced blank verse into Bengali. An even greater writer and the creator of modern Bangla fiction, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, himself a proto-nationalist, actually argued that imitation of foreign models was desirable if it spurred new literary forms and modes of creativity. For his contemporary, educated Bangla readers, he wanted a wider literary universe, consisting of both Indian and Western texts, which could be read in comparison and conjunction (Das 25).

It is time to return to Tagore's speech Visva-Sahitya (World Literature). Even in print, it retains the protean fluidity and plasticity of an oral presentation. Tagore's main concern is the relationship between the inner and the outer worlds, between our individual psyche and the circumambient planetary ecumene. In the first part of the essay, Tagore propounds three ways in which we relate to our world—he calls these the connection of the intellect, the connection of need, and the connection of joy. The first, when more fully explained, turns out to be similar to how the scientist relates to the material world in his attempts to understand it. The intellect, according to Tagore, realizes itself in understanding and discovering the laws and mysteries of nature. In doing so, it realizes itself. The second connection is that of need. When we need others, when self-interest motivates our connection with the world, we do know and understand ourselves and others more and more; yet, Tagore says, a barrier remains. Self-interest is not the highest way of relating to others. Finally, there is the connection of joy. In joy, there are no questions or doubts. If in giving of ourselves, we experience joy, then there is neither hesitation nor questioning. In fact, in such self-giving, we may even squander away our self-interest. Our miserliness in one form of relationship is happily abandoned for a reckless squandering. What is important to understand, however, is that in Tagore's view, without some form of self-giving and relating to others, we cannot realize ourselves. On our own, we remain restricted and unfulfilled. In fact, the sole purpose of our talents is to know others and give ourselves to them; without that we cannot reach the truth of our being, of our human condition.

Tagore thus adopts a radical relationality in both his ethical and aesthetic positions. The arguably solipsistic Vedantic attitude of atmanyevatmanatustah (Bhagavad Gita II. 54) or of the self-being content in and of itself seems to be eschewed totally by Tagore, who not only accepts the reality, even if contingent of the phenomenal world, but considers it absolutely essential for one's own completion. Tagore's duality, however, is not absolute; neither the world nor the self can find their purpose without one another, let alone exist independently of one another. In this essay, Tagore declares that by keeping aloof to oneself, we restrict

and stunt ourselves; great souls are those who can "disseminate" their souls among the masses, thereby filling their own souls to the brim in doing the work of others. Tagore considers knowing oneself through and among others as the dharma or categorical imperative of our times.

However, in such self-knowing and self-giving, we encounter many impediments and obstructions. Selfishness and pride are chief among these. They prevent us from opening ourselves and offering ourselves to others. They prevent the generous and free intercourse of the human spirit. But, in a masterly stroke, Tagore argues that the greater the difficulties and the struggle to overcome them, greater the burnishing of the soul. He says that we read the biographies of great men precisely to find in their efforts to overcome their difficulties a counterpart of our own essential nature striving to manifest itself more fully in the world by overcoming the obstacles that we face.

After touching, once again, on the relation of the intellect to the world, Tagore now focuses in the rest of his essay on office and home, work and creativity, self-interest and joy, utility and beauty, as the two main contrasting ways of relating to the world. The former is calculating and transactional, the latter is guileless and giving; while the one is miserly, the other liberal; the one is curtailed by need, the other arises out of liberty. Through a series of examples and analogies, Tagore shows how the relationship of joy with the world is an outcome of the soul's deep need to express itself in all its plenitude and fullness. To do so, even at the risk of squandering all its riches, it seizes upon whatever external resources it can marshal to fully manifest itself:

> Our heart-goddess's [hriday-Lakshmi's] pride is hurt when she cannot send back an offering equal to what she receives from the world. To manifest the pride of her reciprocal hospitality she creates her tray of offerings using many ingredients, many languages, voices, brushes, and stones. In so doing, if any of her needs be served well and good, but often, even at the cost of her own needs, she is eager to express herself. She wants to announce herself even if the price is bankruptcy. The division of expression in man's nature is his main sector of incautious spending – it is here that the accountant of the intellect laments.

Here, Tagore introduces the ancient aesthetic principle of rasa or juice, flavor, or relish. For a heart seeking to express itself, the world is full of relish; such relish is also transmitted into its own creative self-giving that takes the form of literature or art. Thus, do we, even at the risk of all practical values, participate in the joyous sacrifice [ananda-yajna] of life. Our heart's deepest urge can only be realized in its meeting the outside world in an act of self-giving through which it finds it self-expression and fulfillment.

Tagore now develops his unique theory of the surplus value that proves that the world is both beautiful and joyous, a fit object of aesthetic perception and enjoyment:

> Beauty in the world is a manifestation of such largesse. The flower, we see, is in no hurry to become the seed; it transcends its need and blooms beautifully; the clouds do not rush off after raining, they languorously and needlessly catch our eyes with their colours; the trees do not stick-like spread their arms outwards as beggars for light and shower, but green thickets of leaves fill the horizon with their bounty; the sea, we notice, is not an

> immense office that transports water to the atmosphere in the form of clouds but intimidates by its fathomlessness; and the mountain not only feeds water to the rivers of the earth but like Rudra deep in yoga, stills the fears of those who cross the skies – then we find the hriday-dharma [the heart-purpose] of the world. Then the ever-wizened intellect asks, why this careless expenditure in needless efforts? The ever-young heart answers, just because it pleases me; I see no other reason.

The universe exists of its own sweet will, as the self-expression of some cosmic force, call it the Creator, who wishes for his own enjoyment and pleasure to manifest himself in his myriad majesty so as to realize and apprehend himself more fully. That is why the universe is born of and expresses its own ananda or the fundamental joy of self-expression and self-recognition.

Tagore now makes his non-dualistic move after allowing for not just the separation and then coupling of the self and the world, but also of the diversity of individual and phenomenal reality. He asserts:

> The heart knows: there is one heart that expresses itself every moment in the universe. Why else would there be so much beauty, music, gestures, signs, and signals, so much decoration across creation? The heart is not taken in by the miserliness of business: that is why to entice it need has been so elaborately hidden from the earth, the water, and the skies in so many needless arrangements. If the world was not flavourful [rasamay] we would have been small, insulted beings. Our hearts would say, I am not invited to the world's sacrifice [yajna]. But the whole world, surpassing its various duties, has brimmed over with joy and is telling the heart, in so many different way, I want you: in laughter I want you, in tears I want you, in fear I want you, in assurance I want you, in anger I want you, in peace I want you.

From feeling small and left out, suddenly the earth becomes our home, our mother, our lover; none is to be left out or disqualified, but all are invited to the feast of life. Through the sublime act of self-giving in which the heart, overcoming all impediments, finds its joyous self-expression in the world, realizing itself in the process of relating to others through a spendthrift and uncalculating relish, all alienation is abolished. The microcosm and the macrocosm are harmonized, their oneness re-established; beauty and bliss reign over all the worlds.

Tagore now comes more specifically to literature, explaining its non-utilitarian value:

> That is why there is no bar on man's self-expression in literature. Self-interest is far from it. Here, pain pours a cloud of tears upon our hearts, but it does not interfere with our household duties [samsara]; fear sways our heart but does not harm our bodies; happiness fills our hearts with the touch of mirth but does not awaken our greed. In this way man has woven alongside his household of necessities a need-free habitation of literature. There he is able to experience his own nature through various rasas without harming himself in any practical sense; here he can discover expression unhampered by obstacles. There is no obligation here, only happiness. There are no guards here, only the emperor himself.

Literature is a manifestation of man's affluence, his exceeding the straitened circumstances of his planetary existence, the surpluses of his heart that he wants to share with the others, his own return for the riches that he has encountered and enjoyed in the world. Literature, he adds, has a further function: it selects, it concentrates, and it unifies what is scattered and piecemeal in the real world.

In its concentration of value, it takes the human being to the sublime more directly than the ordinary world does. Taking a dig at "modern literature," Tagore declares that not all ages, however, are capable of such magnificence and munificence:

> In that hour of crisis the distorted mirror magnifies the small and in the literature of such a time man augments his pettiness, floods his own shortcomings with audacious light. Then craftiness takes the place of art, pride substitutes glory and Tennyson is replaced by Kipling.

Here, we see how this essay of Tagore belongs to the high idealism that preceded the two wars. Later, there would be a much more somber and anguished reflection of the degradation of the human spirit. Tagore would not only digest modern literature, but reinvent himself. In the dark days just before World War II, he would, in fact, question the very capacity of words to make sense, seeking refuge instead in a sort of visual language or chitrelekha. In the last poems of Prantik dated Christmas 1937, he would invoke the rising of the chitrabhanu, the sun of images, to combat the civilizational crisis that he saw all around himself, where words themselves had turned into meaningless propaganda.[5] But Visva-Sahitya shows us an earlier, more idealistic Tagore, still secure in his belief in the joyous possibilities of art.

Tagore now comes not just to the end of his speech but to its actual purpose, to speak of world literature. He tells us that literature is not an expression of specific individuals or even of particular nations. Instead, it is the articulation of the "universal man" [*visva manav*]. This universal man is more like the essence of human nature as found in all ages and all peoples of the world, the deepest, profoundest, most lasting truth of the human condition:

> … to see literature through the mirror of nation, time, and persons is to diminish it and not see it fully. If we understand that in literature the universal man [visva-manav] expresses himself, then we might discern what to expect in literature. Where the author has is nothing but the pretext of literary composition, his writing has failed. Where the author has experienced in his own being the being of all men, where his writing expresses the pain of every man, there his work has found its place in literature.

This truth, somehow, is also tied up with the most intense human suffering. The great creative artist somehow can feel in himself the travail of the whole race and express it as none others can.

Tagore now gives us the astonishingly telling image of the mansion of world literature:

> Thus must we view literature as a temple that universal man [visva manav] has built; writers have come from all times and all nations to work as labourers in this project. The plan of the

[5] I owe this insight into Shri Samik Bandyopadhyay who has worked on the 1,450 paintings of Tagore from this period which have never been seen because they were locked up in the vaults of Visva-Bharati, the university that Tagore founded. These paintings show Tagore's strenuous efforts to liberate himself not only from the tyranny of words but to step out, as he himself desired, out of the khyatiprangan, to liberate himself the arena of fame in which he found himself trapped.

> building is not in front of us, but whatever is wrong is immediately broken down; every labourer has to use his natural competence to integrate his own composition into the whole and thereby complete the invisible plan. In this is expressed his power and the reason why no one pays him a pittance like an ordinary labourer but respects him like a maestro.[6]

The house of world literature is nothing less than a temple of creativity for Tagore. This temple is being constantly built by myriad hands, but it is never finished. It ever remains a work in progress. Mahakala, or Great Time, the great winnower, filters out what is slight, ephemeral, or inconsequential; only that which is lasting, precious, and meaningful is allowed to remain: "man is breaking and re-making himself only to voice himself in the universal, to realize himself in the many." The great writer "tries to see not the individual but the deeper intention in the striving soul's constant endeavour to transcend his personal history. He does not return after seeing the pilgrims—he looks for the deity that all the pilgrims have congregated to see."[7]

Tagore thus argues that just as the world is not "the sum of patches of land belonging to different people" literature too is not the "mere total works composed by different hands" (cited in Das 27). He wanted readers to free themselves from "rusticity" and "narrow provincialism" (ibid), to try to see the totality of human creativity in a holistic manner: "we must strive to see the work of each other as a whole, that whole as a part of man's universal spirit in its manifestations through world literature. Now is the time to do so" (ibid). This powerful appeal is a typical expression of Tagore's spirit of universalism and integrated understanding of all

[6] Bose's translation of the same passage reads as follows: Now is the time to say the actual thing—that is, we diminish literature by containing it within the constraints of time, nation and individual. If we understand that literature is universal man's attempt to express himself, then alone can we discern what we ought to within literature. Where the writer has been seen as mediator, there his writing has been limited. Where he has felt the emotions of all mankind, expressed the whole extent of human pain, there his work has attained its place in literature. Then, we must see literature thus—a builder of global standards is engaged upon constructing this temple: writers from many countries and many periods are workers engaged upon this construction site. None of us have the entire plan of the building before us, it is true, but the portions that do not cohere with it are broken and rebuilt again and again; each worker has to work according to his contribution, becomes part of that invisible plan, and it is in this that his genius is expressed-which is why he is not paid the meagre wages of a labourer, but earns the respect of the expert. (http://www.complitju.org/World%20Literature/WorldLiterature.html).

[7] Bose's translation of this passage is as follows: If we want to understand man as revealed in action, his motivation and his aims, then we must pursue his intentions through the whole of history. To take isolated instances, such as the reign of Akbar or queen Elizabeth, to merely satisfy curiosity. He who knows the Akbar and Elizabeth are only pretexts or occasions; the man, throughout the world of history is incessantly at work to fulfill his deepest purposes, and to unite himself with the All—it is he, I, say, who will strive to see in history not the local and the individual, but the eternal and universal man. His pilgrimage will not end in observing other pilgrims, or he will behold the god whom all pilgrims are seeking. (Cited in Sisir Kumar Das 26) Interestingly, just over a hundred years later, Salman Rushdie writes The Enchantress of Florence (2008), a novel that links Elizabeth and Akbar in a sort of fictional attempt to unify their then separate worlds.

human beings as part of one indivisible and interconnected unit. For Tagore, what was meant by world literature "is the way in which the soul of man expresses its joy through the written word and the forms which he chooses to give to his eternal being" (ibid).

Clearly, Tagore's idea of world literature is not the same as what those who practice the discipline of Comparative Literature uphold. Tagore's holism is not so much concerned with comparisons, but with the essence of human experience and expression, which he considers both universal and unified, despite all the local variations. For him, we must learn to accept and embrace humankind as a whole, regardless of differences of race, culture, region, and nation. We can do this only by broadening our spirit, learning about each other without the artificial divisions of power and the inequalities imposed by economics, imperialism, or race. World literature for Tagore is a liberation from narrow-mindedness and prejudice, the entering of humanity into a new cosmopolitan spirit, which he thought was the demand of the times. Of course, these remarks were made before the two great wars, which considerably shook the poet's faith in human nature or universal values. First Japan's militarism and later Nazi Germany's anti-humanism made Tagore worry incessantly about the future of the human race. He also tried to reinvent himself, his creative impulse, as well as language itself to cope with the new challenges posed to him by such cataclysmic world events.

Quoting a key passage from this speech, the Web site of the first Department of Comparative Literature in India at Jadavpur University also goes on to cite an excerpt from an article by its founder, Buddhadeva Bose:

> Potentially, India is one of the richest fields for Comparative Literature. The age and complexity of our civilization, the diverse elements that compose it, that 'world-hunger' of which Tagore spoke a hundred times and which took possession of us with the dawning of our modern age – all these provide the material and atmosphere demanded by the nature of this discipline. The history of India is a story of absorption, adaptation and assimilation, of continual coming to terms with foreign influences, and of resistance transformed into response. We have great links with many cultures of the East and West; our religions have influenced Western thought; interest in our arts and literatures is now keen and widespread. If Comparative Literature is permitted to develop, it can be of service in bringing India and the world spiritually closer and it can make a small contribution to the growth of that cosmopolitan spirit which is much more discussed than achieved. Nothing reveals the soul of a nation as clearly as does its literature, nor is there any other thing where the basic unity of mankind is felt with such force and animation.

The last few paragraphs of Tagore's essay on world literature, thus, find themselves mostly appropriated in debates over the desirability, validity, and salience of the discipline of Comparative literature. Occasionally, it is also cited in the context of discussions of world literature, a term that is enjoying a renewed currency after David Damrosch's work. But what Tagore meant by it is not only quite different from Goethe's original formulations, but also from Damrosch's recent ones which concentrate on modes of circulation that enable the texts to travel outside their native regions. Tagore is also not directly concerned with issues of power and inequality which post-colonial critics such as Edward Said or Aijaz Ahmad have

emphasized.[8] Likewise, Tagore does not seem to think of world literature in terms of the actual and varied availability of texts in different parts of the world as Amiya Dev does.[9] Yet, Tagore too, approaching the question from the opposite end from Marx, not unlike the latter, also held that the problem of man was not particular, but universal. Theirs were competing universalisms, emanating from different discursive and philosophical traditions and from different national and cultural backgrounds, yet both held that man, somehow, was one in his struggles and travails. Tagore's essay, however, is about much more than world literature. It is actually a theory of literature and aesthetics in itself. In addition it offers an explanation of how beauty and joy are a part of the implicate order of nature. Finally, above all, the essay is about how we realize our potential and find fulfillment, not in isolation, but only by relating to others. It is through such intercourse and self-giving, all the more in our struggle against the impediments on the way, that we discover who we are and know the world. It is in such engagement and participation of each other's life worlds that our hearts express themselves in literature and touch other living souls in other places and times.

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[8] Ahmad, for instance, says: The idea of world literature in the traditional sense, a la Goethe, remains deeply canonical, even Arnoldian: all the best that has been thought and written is now to be culled not from this or that nation but from the world. If you think about it, this way of reading "great books" produced in the various continents in the world, assembled in a canonizing way, is perfectly reconcilable with the intensified integration of the upper classes of the world into something resembling a world bourgeoisie. It is very easy for world literature to represent this global integration and arrive at an easy, even very glossy capitalist universalization. In this area, we have to question the very idea of literature and we have to be very suspicious of all texts, certainly including the ones that arrive from the Third World, insofar as they display the slightest potential for canonicity. We have to begin, in fact, with a great suspicion of the very fact that the category of world literature as a pedagogical object is arising in the core capitalist countries, whereas the poorer countries have no means of their own to constitute such objects. Such remarks reflect a larger mistrust with homogenizing and universalizing projects.

[9] Dev says: "if you want me to define world literature I may say it is the sum total of texts available to me at this moment, translations included. And it is not imperative that we all have the same world literature. As they say in any lucrative offer, terms and conditions apply, here too politics obtain. We shall all be fools of time to say that world literature is one and the same everywhere. If it were so, there would be no need of comparative literature" (12).

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Chapter 6
"The World in a Nest": Rabindranath Tagore on Nationalism and Internationalism

Sachidananda Mohanty

Abstract In this essay, Mohanty engages with Ashis Nandy's view of Tagore as "one who ended up against his own instincts… almost a counter-modernist, critic of the advanced West." The author holds that in this view, Nandy glosses over the cosmopolitan networks of Utopian thinking regarding nationalism and internationalism in which Tagore's ideas circulated and had their being. In particular, he brings into his analysis figures like Mirra Alfassa [the Mother], Paul Richard, James Cousins, and Sri Aurobindo through the use of travel narratives that are grounded in Japan, exploring thereby the affinities these figures shared with Tagore.

Keywords Nationalism · Internationalism · Cosmopolitanism · Utopianism · East–West dialogue · Civilization studies

At the height of anti-colonial protests in India and elsewhere, Tagore was chastised by many as a romantic who had reservations about the claims of nationalism. By hindsight, at the beginning of the new millennium, it would be admitted that much of Tagore's reflections on the subject have been borne out by the unfolding of history, following his passing in 1941.

What I should like to do in this chapter is not to review or revisit Tagore's considerable body of writings and speeches on the twin themes of nationalism and internationalism. This I shall do in passing as part of my larger interest in the East–West dialogue that Tagore championed. Basing myself on existing scholarship, I shall argue that his deep interest in nationalism and internationalism led him to a rethinking of cosmopolitan modernity in the first half of the twentieth century.

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I shall draw upon the works of biographer critics like Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson as well as those of social psychologists like Ashis Nandy. Nandy's notable work *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism: Rabindranath Tagore and the Politics of Self* (2004) is probably one of the best in the field. Tagore's journey, as Nandy aptly argues, covered "the Hindu nationalism of his youth and the Brahminical–liberal humanism of his adulthood to the more radical antistatic almost Gandhian social criticism of his last years" (154).

Nandy's parallel claim about Tagore in the same book seems to be somewhat extreme and less convincing though: "It was a journey," he says, "made by one who had been a builder of modern consciousness in India, one who ended up against his own instincts… almost a counter-modernist, critic of the advanced West" (154).

I shall argue to the contrary and suggest that despite his reservations about Western "civilization" and his roots in the Indian traditions, Tagore upheld a transcendence of cultural boundaries in favor of what he called the *Universal Human*.[1]

Nandy is essentially correct, however, in his view that Gandhi and Tagore saw the "need for a 'national' ideology of India as a means of cultural survival, and both recognized that, for the same reason, India would either have to make a break with the post-medieval Western concept of nationalism or give the concept a new content" (154).

While Nandy seems to be right in his assessment of the views of the two major figures in the way, they intellectually fashioned out their thinking on nationalism and the emerging cosmopolitanism, he seems to have glossed over the fact that there were other figures that had similar and equally interesting ideas on the twin themes under discussion. Bringing these figures into the ambit of our discussion, it seems to me, would be one way of carrying the debate forward. I shall consider primarily the nonfictional writings of Tagore for my purpose.

I shall include in my narrative some of these personalities who played a vital role [as Leela Gandhi insightfully shows in her book on *fin-de-siecle* colonialism and the politics of friendship (2006)] in dealing with the vexing question of nationalism and internationalism. These were Paul Richard and Mirra (Alfassa) Richard [1878–1973] (later The Mother) and Aurobindo Ghose (Sri Aurobindo) [1872–1950].

Some differentiation must be made at the outset for theoretical clarity. Of the three mentioned above, the last one, namely Sri Aurobindo, like Tagore and Gandhi, was a contributor to Indian nationalism, whereas Paul Richard and Mirra Alfassa, as Europeans, appear to be "outsiders" to the bounded discourse of Indian nationalism. What I am proposing here is that the nationalist discourse in the early twentieth century is more complex than one circumscribed by native

[1] I have argued in the Introduction, following Saranindranath Tagore, that in Rabindranath there is no necessary contradiction between the universal and the particular. In fact, the universal gains significance on account of the uniqueness of the particular in aesthetic and cultural terms (S. Tagore: 1070–1084).

agents. Sliding into cosmopolitan and internationalist concerns, Indian nationalism is better understood, it seems to me, by deploying the trope used by Leela Gandhi who problematizes the notion of the "boundary" by speaking of "affective communities."

Accordingly, a theoretical caveat is called for before we proceed: From the Saidean, understanding of Orientalism, Westerners like Paul Richard, Mirra Alfassa, and James Cousins would be naturally treated as "suspect" in the colonial context. This problem would be of interest to the constitution of the newly emerging "internationalist" discourse. To overcome the impasse, I would suggest that we take up a post-Saidean reading of Orientalism as our point of departure.

In other words, I shall argue that early twentieth century cosmopolitanism includes within its ambit a strand of internationalism in which some intellectuals from the East and the West attempted a "free" dialogue of world cultures. These Westerners were markedly different from the Orientalists that Said homogenizes. Instead, they may be better visible in terms of transnational "affective communities" that Leela Gandhi postulated. I would suggest that certain Indian nationalists like Tagore and Sri Aurobindo and to a lesser extent Gandhi, also belong to this category.

All the three above shared intimate friendship with Tagore and enjoyed mutual admiration: Mirra and Paul Richard met Tagore in Japan during World War I. On occasion, the Richards journeyed together with the poet and shared common public space and platform in Japan. Greatly impressed by Mirra, Tagore invited her to come and take charge of Santiniketan. Mirra politely declined the offer stating that she was on an alternate spiritual quest. [The typewriter that Tagore gifted Mirra is still preserved at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram as part of the *Sri Smriti Collection*, just as the group photograph of Tagore, Mirra, and Paul Richard, are part of the prominent photograph collection displayed at the Rabindranath Bhavan at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan].

The encounter of such diverse cultures in Japan in the second decade of the twentieth century is itself a happenstance of the complex global idea force at work at this time. The fascination for Japan by Parisians of the early twentieth century included an existential interest in the dialogue of continents, which motive the travels of the Richards. For Tagore's travels east, we must look to Pan-Asianism, the ambiguous ideology of a counter-narrative to the hegemony of the West that many intellectuals of the period championed, and certainly all the three figures under discussion deeply cherished. The ambiguity to pan-Asianism may be seen developing in the militaristic nationalism of Japan that upheld the rhetoric of an anti-Western alternative, but became increasingly fascist in character. Tagore himself was extremely wary of this growing trend and criticized it strongly, in the minds of personae like Paul and Mirra, the shadowy *Black and Dragon Society* of Mitsuro Toyama, may have ill accorded with the fabled aestheticism of Japanese culture that Mirra cherished and hoped would be Japan's gift to the world. *The League for the Equality of Races* that Richards, Tagore, and other internationalists of the period strongly advocated would fall upon deaf ears; the message of world unity would have to wait for another world conflagration before being enshrined in

the historic meet in San Francisco at the end of World War II, leading to the formation of the United Nations.

The moot point here is that both Paul and Mirra were deeply invested in the necessity for the cultural and political self-determination for non-Western nations and were hence committed to the anti-colonial struggle. While they ardently supported Indian nationalism, they espoused too, like Tagore, a newer form of cosmopolitanism. Like Tagore, they were interested in the contribution of non-Western cultural histories to an international cause. This can be seen as the operation of an alternative Orientalism to that which Said so powerfully critiqued.

Sri Aurobindo's role in India's freedom struggle, especially during the militant *Swadeshi* period, the Partition of Bengal, and the Alipore Bomb Case, 1908–1909, are well known and recorded. What is equally not known is the way he goes beyond a bounded nationalism, as Gandhi and Tagore did, to the advocacy of internationalism and global culture that respected the pluralities of nationhood. In doing so, he shared deep affinities with Tagore.

Equally unknown is the role Paul Richard played in helping to eradicate the penal colonies in French Guiana. "Soon after I entered law school," he recalls in his memoir, "a group of ex-convicts from the penal colony in French Guiana approached me with the request that I visit the area and report the atrocious conditions there" (Richard 1987: 35). At the same time, paradoxically, Richard seems to typify the ambiguities of the anti-Western nationalism that many Europeans of his time embraced. Beginning with a socialistic mission for the liberation of the colonies from Western imperialism, he came to embrace, at least in the middle period of his career, a domineering male ideal that demanded the oppressive surrender of the body and the mind of associates and servitors for the ultimate cause of Asiatic identity.

More significantly, during the time he shared with Tagore in Japan, Richard promoted movements like *League for the Equality of Races* (Richard: 89). Mirra's own role in the promotion of internationalism, founded on nonsectarian spiritual principles, is better known. By 1920, she and Paul were in Pondicherry and by 1926; Mirra had been designated The Mother by Sri Aurobindo and become his spiritual collaborator at his ashram. An ardent internationalist, after Sri Aurobindo's passing in 1950, she led the ashram and came to create an experiment in international living under the auspices of the UNESCO in 1968. This was the "planetary city" of Auroville, still thriving and developing. The ideas these figures shared on nationalism and internationalism were not static. They evolved over a period in time, were complex in character, and eschewed easy binaries and polarities. These ideas, broadly common, were integral to an emerging cosmopolitanism. It may be useful, in the first instance, to review Tagore's ideas of Nationalism.

6.1 I

Some of Tagore's early essays on Nationalism, published in 1917, reprinted by Macmillan in 1985, were later collected in a single volume under "Nationalism in Japan," "Nationalism in the West," and "Nationalism in India" (Tagore 2002a).

In these essays, Tagore makes a distinction between the spirit of the West and nations of the West. He sees a manifest difference between the Western nations and Western civilization. There is material success of the West accompanied by *spiritual* poverty. He then goes on define a nation. "A nation," he says, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organized for a mechanical purpose, whereas "society as such no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself." (60) "Greed of wealth and power can never have a limit and compromise of self-interest can never attain to final spirit of reconciliation." (63) Unfortunately, this mechanical concept, "this abstract being, the Nation is ruling India." We Indians must remember that we are "individuals with living sensibilities." (65) Time has come for us to make a fundamental distinction between the "moral man" and the "political and the commercial man."

Tagore sees that Japan has been able to resist the dominance of Western civilization. We in India may lack many admirable qualities of the Japanese, but none can claim that "our intellect is naturally unproductive." (74) We must remember that the spirit of "conflict and conquest is at the origin and in the centre of Western nationalism." (74) The Western man, with his "mental and material power far outgrowing his in oral strength, is like an exaggerated giraffe whose head has suddenly shot up miles away from the rest of him." (90)

In turning to India, Tagore sees the problem here as not "political" but "social." He reminds us that the Western approach has been one of "political and commercial aggressiveness." Each nation, he maintains "must be conscious of its mission." A mere imitation is a source of weakness. For it hampers our true nature; it is always in our way. It is like dressing our skeleton with another man's skin and the bone. (6) Japan cannot turn itself into a "borrowed machine." He recalls the earlier ties of unity that bound the nations of Asia with Japan, whereas the "political civilization" of the West is based on exclusiveness. The Western charges against the East are not borne out by facts. This is not to deny the greatness of the West in its literature, culture, and the arts. But Eastern Asia has followed its own paths that are "not political but social" not predatory and mechanically efficient but spiritual and based upon the varied and deeper relations of humanity. (22) He admires and maintains that "all particular civilization is the interpretation of particular human experience." (27) Japan must not accept the force of Western man's ever growing store house and the emptiness of his hungry humanity. He is appalled by the "organized selfishness of nationalism as religion."

While all governments are mechanical and impersonal, the British government, according to Tagore, was like a "power loom" and the earlier native governments may be compared to a "handloom." For, in the products of the handloom, "the magic of man's living fingers finds its expression and its hum harmonizes with the music of lie. But the power loom is relentlessly lifeless and accurate and monotonous in its production." (70) Consequently, Tagore advises Indians to use their past creatively so that they could work toward "an adjustment of races, to acknowledge the real differences between them and yet seek some basis for unity." While he had earlier spoken of nationalism as a *Bhougalik Apadevata*, "a geographical demon," he now declared that he was "against the general idea of all nations." While he recognized the need for the anti-colonial movements, he rejected the extremists who

were inspired by Western models. For the so-called free people in the West were not really free, they were only “powerful.” One may recall here the conversations between Nikhil, Bimala, and Sandeep in Tagore’s novel, *Ghare Baire*. [*The Home and the World*].

He chastises the Japanese and is not happy with what he sees in their land. Japan, he declares, must not imitate the West. Japan’s bloom, he regrets, in another essay entitled “Asia’s Response,” (114) has been poisoned by Western colonialism. For, “we cannot imitate life we cannot simulate strength for long, nay, what have contributed to the solution of the problem at the level of the world. Cooperative approach, he argues, is the need of the hour.” For, “only those people have survived and achieved civilization who have this spirit of cooperation strong in them.” (108) He recognizes what the Americans perceive as the “nomadic restlessness” of their culture vis-à-vis the “settled traditions of Europe” (113) and contends that India “has never had a real sense of nationalism.” (115) He discards the received wisdom in India that the “idolatry of the nation is almost better than reverence to God and humanity.” He is happy to state that he has “outgrown that teaching” and urges upon his countrymen to do so. (116) He hopes that the West would discover its true self that is by “teaching the ignorant and helping the weak.” (119)

Speaking of the split in the Congress Party at Surat in 1907, he distances himself from the Extremist Party whose ideals, he argues, “were based on Western history. They had no sympathy with the special problems of India” (124) He concludes poetically by stating that he is not an economist and that the notion of the “harmony of completeness in humanity” and the “compensation of External Justice” would transform the “insults” of the last and the dispossessed into a “golden triumph” (143).

6.2 II

Tagore’s complex views on nationalism, outlined in the above analysis, are also manifested in many of his books and articles. His reservation about Western culture seems to be a persistent one despite his admiration (at times problematic) of personalities like Mussolini.[2]

[2] On May 30, 1926, Tagore met Mussolini and some of his officials like Formichi. He was treated well by El Duce and was shown around the new state that Mussolini was trying to shape. As the Tagore biographers, Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson write correctly. “By the time he left Italy on June 22, Rabindranath was in a peculiar state of mind: thrilled by his reception, intrigued by Mussolini, but disturbed by the growing picture of repression and violence underpinning the Fascist state. He was unwilling to believe that he had made a mistake in coming to Italy, but his conscience was pricking him. Now he would be in an anguish of indecision.” See Dutta and Robinson (Dutta and Robinson 1997a: 269).

In his essay on Mahatma Gandhi dated October 2, 1937, he contrasts the Gandhian approach to that of the West. He writes:

> But though Christ declared that the meek shall inherit the earth, Christians now aver that the victory is to the strong, the aggressive. And no wonder. For the doctrine seemed, on the fact of it absurd and contrary to the principles of Natural History as interpreted by Western scientists. It needed another prophet to vindicate the truth of this paradox and interpret 'meekness' as the positive force of love and righteousness, as Satyagraha. This meekness is not submission, or mere passive endurance of wrong or injustice: such submission would be cowardly and would imply co-operation, even though involuntary, with the power of tyranny. But Gandhiji has made of this meekness, or ahimsa, the highest form of bravery, a perpetual challenge to the insolence of the strong (2002a: 17).

Similarly, in his essay entitled "East and West in Greater India" dated 1909–1910, he writes: "we began with a blind foolish, insane begging at the door of Europe with our critical sense entirely benumbed. That was not the way to make any real gain. Whether it be wisdom or political rights, they have to be earned, that is to say to be attained by one's *Shakti* after a successful struggle against obstructing forces" (2003: 84).

At the same time, Tagore is convinced of the underlying humanism of the West. In the essay "Meeting of the East and West" dated 1930, he declares that an English poem once read by him and a friend stirred them "deeply." It was not anything mechanical. It did not represent any physical or material quality. Ah no. It was the message from the heart of the West that touched us deeply (2008: 23–24). Unfortunately, such influences, cathartic in character, are offset by the "menace of power." He goes on to say trenchantly:

> And what is the harvest of your civilization? You do not see from the outside. You do not realize what a terrible menace you have become to man. We are afraid of you. And everywhere people are suspicious of each other. All the great countries of the West are preparing for war, for some great work of desolation that will spread poison all over the world. And this poison is within our own selves. They try, and try to find some solution, but they do not succeed, because they have lost faith in the personality of man (26).

What is the answer to this problem? He finds one in his essay on "China and India." We must "abide," he says "by our obligation to maintain and nourish the distinctive merit of our respective cultures and not to be misled into believing that which is ancient is necessarily outworn and that which is modern is indispensable" (129). He is pitted into a debate regarding the question of the uniqueness of each culture in his correspondence with Gilbert Murray. As Murray writes on August 17, 1934: "All generalizations about whole nations are superficial and inaccurate, even when made by scientific students without personal bias. And most of these actually current are made by prejudiced and utterly unscientific partisans" (2002b: 60). He ends the letter by passionately urging Tagore in a somewhat contradictory manner, to forge "the intellectual union of East and the West" (60). He admits that there are grave perils on the way of world peace and declares his faith in the activities of the League of Intellectual Cooperation (63).

In his cordial reply written from *Uttarayan*, Santiniketan Bengal, dated September 16, 1934, Tagore confesses to Professor Murray that he does not see

"any solution to the intricate evils of disharmonious relationship between nations" nor can he point out "any path which may lead us immediately to the levels of sanity" (62).

The Murray–Tagore correspondence foregrounds an interesting aspect of the national–international debate. Are all generalizations about "national cultures" sweeping and superficial or do nations have "distinctive merits?" Although the current critical approach, in the wake of the disasters wrought by nations in World War II and after, disfavors an "essentialistic" faith in national cultures, several transnational thinkers of the early twentieth century like Tagore and Mirra held a more nuanced view of nationalism. Like Sri Aurobindo, they were deeply conscious of the dangerous use to which such arguments could be put as manifest, for instance, in the Nazi ideology of racial superiority. Sri Aurobindo warned against such trends in his chapter called "True and False Subjectivism" in *The Human Cycle* 1949. However, he believed, as did Mirra and Tagore that each nation has a distinct cultural history, and that each culture could evolve in its own way toward universality. In fact, this becomes the basis for the ideal of Tagore's Santiniketan, ["where the world finds its home in a single nest"]. The same principle seems to underlie the Mother's Auroville experiment.

By the time of Tagore's correspondence with Murray, the political situation at home had worsened and greatly troubled the poet. He was not only compelled to return his knighthood as a result of the British atrocities against Indians specifically in Punjab, he also felt that it was his duty to protest against the inhuman treatment meted out to the revolutionaries who were incarcerated in the cellular jail in the Andamans. This is what he wrote as a public appeal on August 2, 1937:

> The pitiless method of punishment that still persists in many parts of the world in their penal system is enough to condemn human civilization, but of late an aggravated spirit of vindictiveness has suddenly grown in virulence in some Western countries in their dealings with political victims. India has not altogether escaped in her Government from manifesting some degree of such fascistic infection which has scant respect for legitimate claim of human freedom. And a gloom of despair has spread from hundreds of stricken homes over this unfortunate province where men and women of tender age are made to suffer[3] for an indefinite period of detention without trial undergoing various modes of penalty, physical and psychological…
>
> On the continent of Europe they have their Devil's Islands. …their Concentration Campus and other specially built hells for punitive exhibition of humanity, but in England they have no such unhallowed places for intensification of suffering by wrenching away the prisoners from their own soil. When to our dismay we find that the infringement of their own rule has been possible exclusively for the subject races, the insult of their distinction humiliates all of us and I offer my protest in the name of my country (Tagore 1994: 821).

[3] In 1932, the British Government planned to send Bina Das, the revolutionary who had attempted to assassinate the Governor of Bengal Stanley Jackson, to the Cellular Jail. In response, Rabindranath Tagore sent two telegrams: one to C.F. Andrews, and the other to Lady Jackson with an appeal against the decision for transportation to the penal colony. It is to be noted that Tagore's reservation about the Extremist Movement in Bengal and elsewhere did not come on his way of raising his voice against British atrocities against Indians.

At the same time, Tagore apparently saw little difficulty in asking the colonial masters for the financial assistance for his projects in *Sri Niketan*. While Mahatma Gandhi in February 1930 was "widely known to considering another campaign of civil disobedience …here was Tagore soliciting Government assistance" (Dutta and Robinson 1997a: 370). Tagore wrote to the Viceroy Lord Irwin:

> On the occasion of your visit to our Viswa-Bharati it seemed to us that your Excellency received favorable impression of the value of the work that is being done here. This emboldens me to address my appeal for help directly to you (Dutta and Robinson 1997b: 370).

6.3 III

Tagore found answers to some of the grave issues of his times, thanks to what Mary Louis Pratt calls the "contact zones" between cultures. Indeed, he spoke of "imaginary voyages of the mind" between cultures, by which the best of each culture could compensate for inadequacies in other cultures. He saw his many physical voyages precisely in these terms and was destined to meet like-minded souls who were on their own mission for seeing affiliations for a cosmos in the making. Two such personalities had set out on their journey from France to Japan.

Early in 1916, Mirra and Paul Richard[4] left for Japan from France via Britain with a traveling companion, an English woman named Dorothy Hodgeson,[5] a follower of Abdul Baha. They traveled via the Cape of Hope [the Suez Canal was closed] on board the Japanese vessel *Kamamaru*. After two months of travel, they arrived in Japan. From Kobe, they journeyed to Tokyo. Here, Paul met, through a French contact in Paris, an American journalist named Samuel Fleisher, the editor of a daily newspaper called the *Japan Advertiser*. Fleisher asked Paul to write a series of articles about the cause of World War I. Although initiated by Germany, the war, surmised Paul, was "really a European colonial contest, for the dominance of Asia." "I knew," he says, "only one Frenchman who had not been swept

[4] Paul Richard was a French socialist barrister who came to India for the first time in 1910 in order to campaign for a candidate who was seeking a seat to the French assembly from Pondicherry. Married to Mirra Alfassa [later the Mother of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram], he had deep interest in Indian mysticism and was drawn to Aurobindo Ghose [Sri Aurobindo] with whom he and his wife shared lasting correspondence till he parted from Pondicherry in 1920. Richard was an internationalist who exposed the evils in the French penal colony of the Devil's Island, French Guyana. For an autobiographical account of Paul Richard, see Richard (1987). Michel the sociologist was Paul Richard's son by a later marriage with an American woman of Swedish origin. Paul Richard, now a forgotten figure, a spiritualist, was actively associated with anti-colonial struggles and saw the rise of Asia as key to the new internationalism, following the end of the Great War of 1914–1918. See Mohanty (2010).

[5] Later named as Vasavadutta, [more popularly called Dutta in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram circles], by Sri Aurobindo, Dutta lived in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry till the end.

away by the side of hysteria and chauvinist hatred and that was Romain Rolland" (Richard 1987: 83).

Richard's article were perhaps too hard hitting, a pill too bitter for the "quasi-official newspaper" edited by Fleisher. The twelve pieces appeared later in a different form thanks to the intervention of Tagore (Richard: 84). Richard recalls Tagore's visit to Yokohama when he was accompanied by two English friends: Pearson and Andrews. A friendship between Tagore and the Richards ensued. Richard passed on his twelve articles, a critique of European nationalism through Tagore to a friend in Denmark named Hollenberg. Tagore instead forwarded them to James Pond, his literary manager in New York. Upon Pond's suggestion and approval, Tagore agreed to write a foreword to a book comprising Richard's articles. The result was *To the Nations* published by James Pond in New York in 1917.

While in Japan, Richard received a copy of the book handed over by Tagore. Somewhat embarrassed by this turn of events, upstaged by James Pond, Samuel Fleisher published the series of articles in his own newspaper as he had originally planned.

Richard credits Tagore for the "epigrammatic style" he learned from the poet. Surprised at Tagore's indifference to anything that did not satisfy his need for beauty, Richard one day exploded: "How can you enjoy all this peaceful finery in a world at war and in agony" (Richard: 86)? A week later, Tagore, according to Richard, conceded the truth and said: "I have given a great deal of thought to what you told me and I concede the truth in it. But I cannot do otherwise; although I am not very old, I am very tired" (86). Richard's reminiscences of Tagore would make for an interesting study in comparative cultures. Deeply impressed by *Gurudev*, Richard recognizes the poet's outstanding traits and records his own meetings with Pearson at a village not far from Lake Norjiri.

Richard makes other acquaintances too such as Okishama, related to the Imperial Family and Mistsure Toyama, alternately known as "the most respected leader among Japanese patriots" or infamously seen as the head of the dreaded Black Dragon Society, "the greatest master of political bullies and cutthroats in Japan." A man of contradictory traits, Toyama's avowed goals was "Asian Unity and Freedom, and a Renaissance of Spiritual values" (89). As seen earlier, this dangerous admixture of anti-colonial nationalism/pan-Asianism and Japanese militaristic expansionism was perhaps responsible for the ambiguity that marked Richard's faith in Japan as the leader of the resurgent Asia.

Working on the editorial board of Okawa's new magazine *The Asian Review*, Richard and others put together a declaration of racial equality and sent it to the American President, Woodrow Wilson at the Peace Conference in Paris. When Wilson declined to accept this declaration on racial ground, Richard recommended withdrawal of Japan from the Peace Conference.

The Richards met and developed a friendship with James Cousins, an English Professor of Irish origin who was on a visiting assignment at Keyo University, Japan. Cousins was serving in India as Head of Annie Besant's school of Madanapalle and would be instrumental in a publication of the book. Dawn over Asia by Paul Richard, Cousins' role in the promotion of the national–international

debate would be noteworthy. A poet–scholar interested in theosophy who traveled to India and Japan and became a bridge between the east and the west, Cousins made significant contributions to the emerging cosmopolitan culture. It is worth noticing here that while working on a review of James Cousin's book, *New Ways in English Literature*, Sri Aurobindo ended up writing an entirely new volume of literary criticism called *The Future Poetry*.[6] The developments would show the way nationalism of the narrow kind was being rapidly transcended in favor of an intercultural communion that led to creativity of a different kind.

Though the help of Cousins, a manuscript of Richard was accepted by Ganesh and Company of Madras. Published as *The Dawn over Asia* in 1920, translated from the original French into English by Sri Aurobindo, whom Richard refers in the book as "my brother," the volume carried a valuable foreword by Tagore.

In the Opinions section of the book Tagore wrote:

> When I met Monsieur Richard in Japan, I became reassured in my mind about the highest era of civilization than when I read about the big schemes which the politicians are formulating for ushering the age of peace into the world…. When gigantic forces of destruction were holding their orgies of fury, I saw the solitary young French man, unknown to fame…. Face bearing with the lights of the new dawn and his voice vibrating with the message of new life, and I felt sure that the great Tomorrow has already come though not registered in the calendar of the statesman (ix).[7]

The book comprised a series of addresses that Richard gave to Japanese students about the rise of Asia in the context of a new international movement. He identified Sri Aurobindo as the leader of the new age. The appendix comprised a note about the "League, for the Equality of Races."

6.4 IV

It would thus be seen that Tagore's travel to Japan brought him in close contact with a number of others from east and west, who sought a free and creative interchange of cultures and who were leaders on their own terms. Among them, Paul and Mirra Richard would rank as some of the most notable. Parting from Mirra in 1920, Paul left for France, after spending a few years in India, in the Himalayas and elsewhere, he traveled to the USA where he spent the rest of life till he passed away in 1967. Mirra became a collaborator of Sri Aurobindo. She organized an international convention on education in April 1951 at Pondicherry that was presided over by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. In 1968, under the auspices of the UNESCO, she established Auroville, the City of Dawn based on Sri Aurobindo's

[6] First published in the monthly review *Arya*, in thirty-two installments between December 1917 and July 1920, "the installments were written immediately before their publication." "In 1953, the *Arya* text of *The Future Poetry* was brought out as a book, with only two passages of the later revision added."

[7] The India edition was published by Ganesh and Co., Madras, 1920. Also see Hay (1970).

vision of world unity underlined in his book, *The Ideal of Human Unity*. Like Tagore, she envisaged in Auroville the pavilions of the cultures of India and of the world where free from religious, political, and sectarian rivalry; men and women from different parts of the world could live a common life of interchange growing in peace, harmony, progress, and perfection.

Tagore admired Sri Aurobindo as the prophet of the future, the idea be outlined in his *Modern Review* article after their meeting at Pondicherry in 1928 when the poet was on his way to Colombo. Sri Aurobindo's ties with Tagore, from his Bengal days and later through mutual associates such as Dilip Kumar Roy and Sahana Devi, would constitute a topic in itself whose kernel was the common search for a post-Enlightenment modernity based on spiritual foundations.

Unlike Tagore and Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo worked out his philosophy of the future of the Indian culture in his celebrated book *The Foundations of Indian Culture*. One would do well to look especially at the last chapter, "Indian Culture and External Influence."

Speaking of the growing importance of internationalism and human unity, Sri Aurobindo wrote about the need to liberate national cultures and give them their place in a federated comity of nations. The national and the international, he argued, can coexist in each human being. Indeed, there is a paramount need to harmonize the claims of the smaller formations with the larger ones. The secret of this lies, he maintained, in the law of self-determination where each individual, at the deepest core of his psychological and spiritual self, would see an affinity with fellow beings. He wrote insightfully:

> The principle of self-determination really means this that within every living human creature, man, woman, and child, and equally within every distinct human collectivity, growing or grown, half developed or adult there is a self, a being, which has the right to grow in its own way, to find itself, to make its life a full and satisfied instrument and image of its being. This is the first principle which must contain and overtop all others; the rest is a question of conditions, means, expediency, opportunities, capacities, limitations, none of which must be allowed to abrogate the sovereignty of the first essential principle (1998: 838–840).

Sri Aurobindo wrote thirty-five chapters of *The Ideal of Human Unity* that first appeared in the journal *Arya* serially from September 1915 to July 1918 and was published by The Sons of India Ltd., Madras a book with three appendices, a preface and detailed synopsis of the chapters. The book was briefly taken up for reconsideration by the author at the end of World War II. A postscript chapter was added in 1949 where Sri Aurobindo spoke of the Cold War and the future world order.

Underlying the book, written as an argument, lay the cardinal necessity for the awakening of the international idea as an aspiration in individuals. He declared:

> The great necessity, then, and the great difficulty is to help this idea of humanity which is already at work upon our minds and has even begun in a very slight degree to influence from about our actions, and turn it into more than an idea, howsoever strong, to make it a central motive and a fixed part of our nature. Its satisfaction must become a necessity of

our psychological being, just as the family idea or the national idea has become each a psychological motive with its own need of satisfaction (284–287).

Tagore, Gandhi, and Sri Aurobindo constitute a trinity; along with figures such as Richard, Cousins, and Mirra, they give us examples of "affective communities." While the contributions of the first two are widely recognized, the affinity between Tagore and Sri Aurobindo has not been adequately explored. "Tagore is a wayfarer to the same goal as ours though in his own way," wrote Sri Aurobindo memorably to Dilip Kumar Roy.

Indeed, both Tagore and Sri Aurobindo represent the selective assimilation of modernity. Each in his own way resisted what Heidegger called "the Europeanization of the world," and each carved out his unique path for a cosmopolitan modernity.

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Chapter 7
The Bauhaus, Rabindranath Tagore and His Paintings

Partha Mitter

Abstract Tagore's paintings, first exhibited in Europe in 1930, have been considered his "Last Harvest." Original and unclassifiable, they have been read in a variety of ways, as Freudian products of the unconscious, shamanistic intimations of invisible worlds, expressions of color-blindness, or derivative pastiches of German Expressionism. Tagore himself took pain to distance these works from Western or indigenous art movements, preferring them to be categorized as unique works of personal expression. As against these interpretations, this essay stresses the view that there is a wider sense in which both the German Primitivists and Tagore espoused a form of critical modernity. In this universal language of modernism, Indian artists found a new way of expressing anti-colonial resistance while European artists sought non-Western sources of critique against modernity. The exhibition of Bauhaus paintings by the Indian Society of Oriental Art (ISOA) in 1922 in Calcutta, following Tagore's visit to Weimar in 1921, seen in relationship with Tagore, opens a new and different view on the classic modernism in Europe and on Tagore's paintings.

Keywords Art history · East–West dialog · Modernism · Cosmopolitanism · Primitivism · Cultural politics · Bauhaus · Indian Society of Oriental Art

A radical new exhibition at the Bauhaus Foundation in Dessau entitled, Das Bauhaus in Kalkutta, offers a timely reminder that present transcultural exchanges are nothing new; they hark way back to the commencement of the twentieth century.[1] The Indian Society of Oriental Art (ISOA) opened its 14th annual exhibition in Calcutta (now Kolkata) on December 23, 1922, hosting a historic exhibition of

[1] The catalogue of the exhibition (2013). See also my paper in (Jaeggi 2010: 149–158).

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the works of Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and other members of the Bauhaus in Weimar, alongside the avant-garde works of the nationalist Bengal School of Painting. The year 1922 has been variously described as a landmark in High European modernism, symbolized by a dinner held at the Majestic Hotel in Paris, attended by Diaghilev, Stravinsky, Proust, Joyce, and Picasso.[2] Remarkably, in the same year, the exhibition of the Bauhaus artists opened in Calcutta. Though this landmark in global modernism has not received the recognition it deserves, it represents one of the first truly global events that was not confined solely to the West.

The question is: How could such an exhibition take place in an Asian city so far removed from the centers of modernism? The answer to this puzzle is Rabindranath Tagore's cosmopolitan values and his efforts to bring different worlds closer. As we shall see, this cosmopolitanism also helps us to understand the nature of his radical avant-garde painting. We tend to think of modernist art as something simply imposed by the West on the rest of the world. In fact, the global transmission of modernism did by no means travel in one direction; it was a complex and dynamic process in which the West and the rest of the world interacted with one another. Yet because of the imbalance of power between the West and the rest of the world, non-Western avant-garde remains under the radar in art historical discourses. The exhibition of 1922–1923 as a transcultural event was possible only because the Bauhaus avant-garde artists had much in common with the Bengali artists similarly concerned with resisting mainstream art. The Bauhaus opposed the naturalist art of the academies; the Bengal School as an avant-garde movement created an art of resistance to the Victorian academic art in India.[3]

Such intercultural encounters could only be possible through international networks that made conversations across national borders possible. Here the role of "cosmopolitanism" in the creation of global modernity becomes crucial. Transport and communication revolutions—railways, steamships, and the telegraph—which enabled colonial empires such as Britain to secure global dominance, also had a contradictory global effect; it created the ideal conditions for communications across the globe. Print capitalism and hegemonic languages, notably English, French, and Spanish encouraged a worldwide circulation of ideas, a phenomenon I have described as "virtual cosmopolitanism" (Mitter 2007: 11–12, 100).

This global community of "virtual cosmopolitans," who relied on the circulation of printed texts and images, came into existence during European expansion overseas; but there were also cosmopolitans, who took advantage of the transport

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[2] Kevin Jackson provocatively titles it *1922*: *The Birth of Modernism* (2011) that marks the appearance of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*; also Richard Davenport-Hines (2012) calls the party at the Majestic the high point of modernism. Brazilian modernism is also dated to 1922.

[3] I develop the notion of a Pan-Asian regional avant-garde in my paper, Rabindranath Tagore, Okakura Tenshin and the Creation of a Regional Modernist Art in Asia given in Vienna Paper at the conference, Abstract Space-Concrete Media: Avant-gardes beyond Western Modernism, organized by Christian Kravagna of the Academie der bildenden Künste and Museum Moderner Kunst, Stiftung Ludwig,Vienna.

revolution, traversing the world and being at home in the international milieu. They belonged to a small minority of the privileged such as Rabindranath Tagore who helped bridge the gulf between the East and the West. The UNESCO recently celebrated three great poets from outside the metropolitan center, Rabindranath Tagore of India, Pablo Neruda of Chile, and Aimé Césaire of the Martinique, each of whom in their own way made unique contributions to global culture, challenging the colonial center and its hegemonic assumptions. Of the three, Tagore, the oldest, had the distinction of being the first non-European to receive the Nobel Prize in 1913, the year that Césaire was born. Neruda received his Nobel in 1971, thirty years after Tagore's death. To me, these intersections of history are fascinating partly because they help mediate between the West and the non-West, offering a powerful voice for the colonized. According to UNESCO, these poet activists challenged the contradictions of an unequal and unfair world system, proposing a concrete and universal humanism.[4]

Rabindranath contributed as much to global modernism, as an alternative voice of modernity, as he took from the West. Again, it was his great reputation that persuaded Kandinsky and other members of the Bauhaus to show in Calcutta. One of the leading architects of Indian modernity, both as an educationist and as a painter, Tagore took a lively interest in European culture, particularly modernism, including the Bauhaus. Possibly the most famous world figure during the Inter-War years, he had admirers in every field. Following the translation of his book of poems, *Gitanjali*, Tagore became a household name in Germany; his well-publicized visits prompted witty cartoons in the comic magazine, *Simplicissimus* (Fig. 7.1). As noted by Johannes Itten, a teacher at the Bauhaus in Weimar, on May 7, 1921 Tagore's birthday was celebrated with a recital of poems and songs at the German National Theatre in the city.[5] As we shall see, in the year 1930, Rabindranath had very successful shows of his paintings in the West, notably Germany. To reiterate, even allowing for the power imbalance between India and Europe, Tagore is a striking example of the Bakhtinian cultural exchange between India and the West, between the metropolis and the periphery, challenging the notion that cultural flows between the West and the Rest are always a one-way process (Bakhtin 1981; Holquist 2002).

Rabindranath Tagore was born into a highly cultured, well-to-do family in Calcutta that had been at the forefront of the intellectual movement known as the Bengal Renaissance. He was taught to sketch from life by a drawing tutor as part of his general education, which was the norm for children of affluent families in colonial Calcutta. Rabindranath cultivated his interest in drawing throughout his young days, often jotting down natural scenery or likenesses of his near relations and friends in his sketchpad (Mitter 2007: 66). Other great literary figures such as

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[4] See http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/dialogue/tagore-neruda-and-cesaire/.

[5] See *Das Frühe Bauhaus* (516–518). See also letter of G. Kunz where he quotes Bauhaus-Archiv, Darmstadt that the exhibition 'was arranged following a suggestion of Rabindranath Tagore.' (Parimoo, 169).

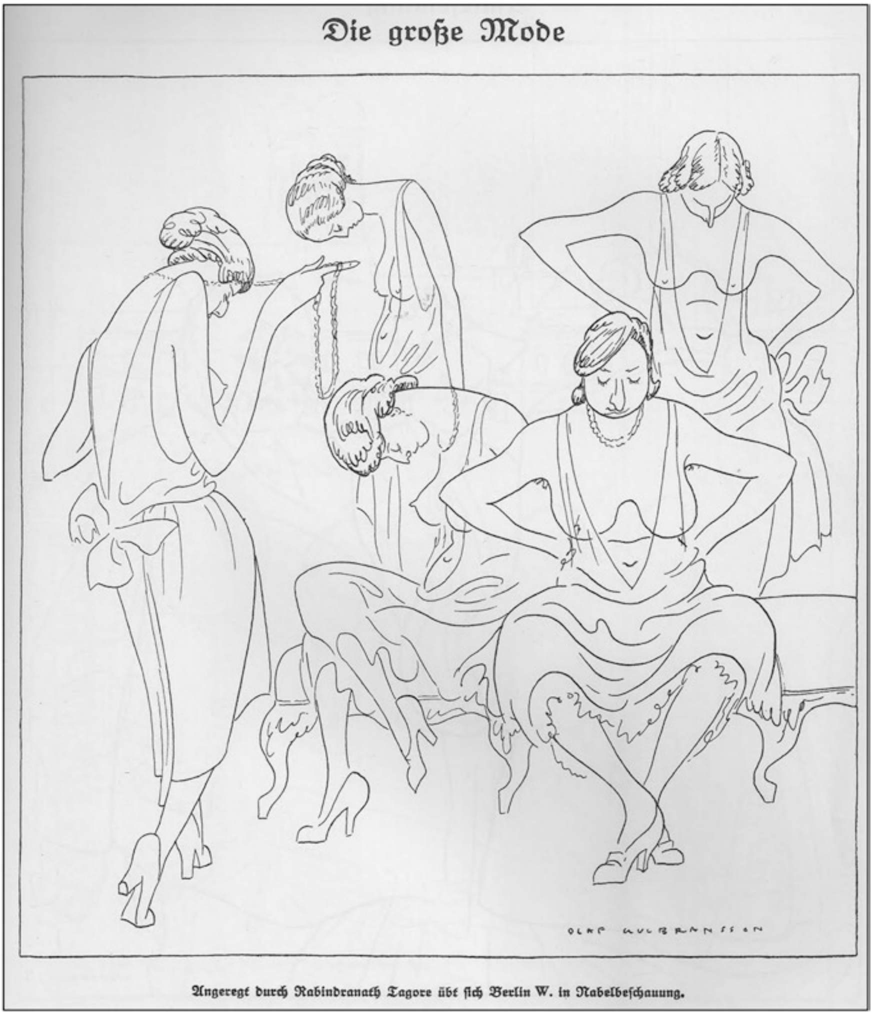


Fig. 7.1 Olaf Gulbrannson, German Fashion, Illustration, 1921. (*The height of fashion: fashionable women of Berlin, inspired by the Hindu poet Sir Rabindranath Tagore*, *contemplate their navels*)

D.H. Lawrence, Victor Hugo, and Kahlil Gibran were competent painters. However, unlike them but like the composer Arnold Schönberg, Tagore engaged actively with the avant-garde in art. In his sixties, Tagore suddenly burst upon the art scene with a provocative, anti-representational art full of radical distortions. We may well ask: What happened in these intervening years? How did he reach his Damascus, as it were? Scholars, including myself, have retold many times the story of his sudden conversion. Let me rehearse it here once more: As a man of

letters and an esthete, he was acutely conscious of the beauty of line and wrote in an elegant calligraphic style. He discovered that he could transform the deletions and crossed-out passages in his manuscripts into abstract decorative shapes. His own burgeoning interest in primitive art in the 1920s could also be put to a good use in this. The best known one is the fearsome reptile in his manuscript, *The Rakta Karabi*, dated 1923 (Fig. 7.2); however, there exists an even earlier sketch in

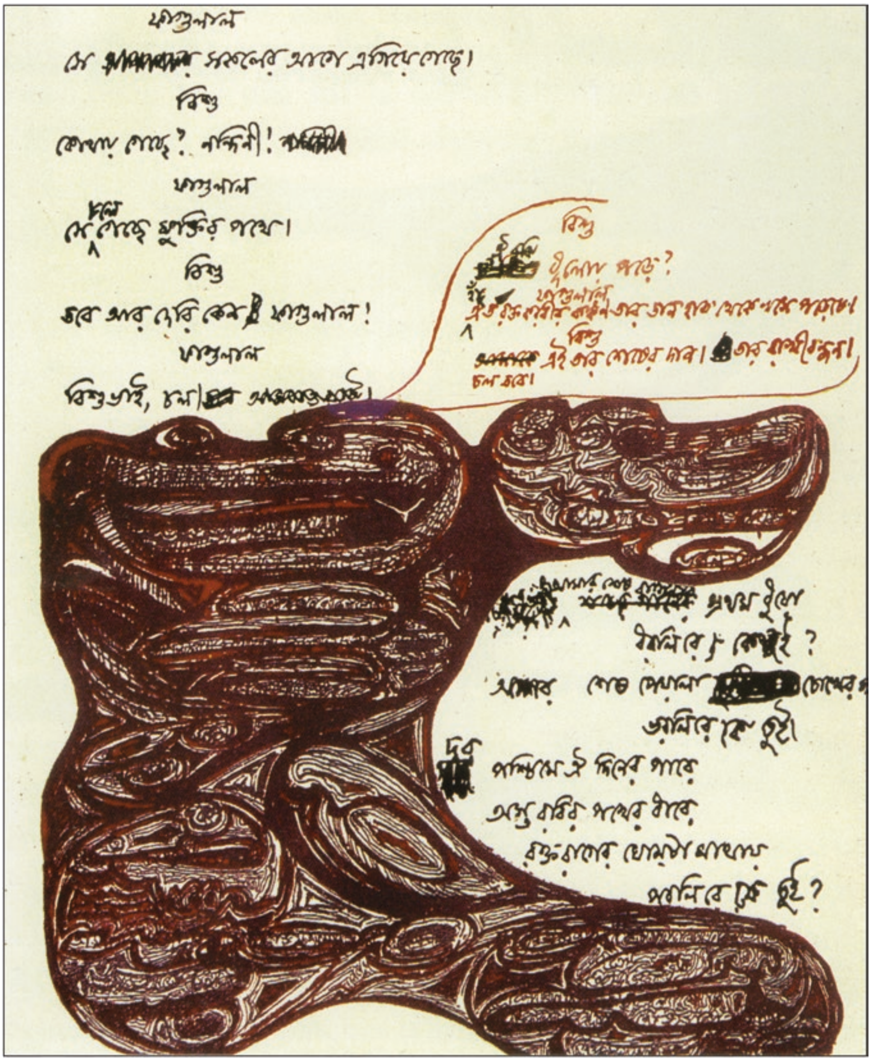


Fig. 7.2 Rabindranath Tagore, doodle from *Rakta Karabi* manuscript, *red ink*, c. 1923 (Rabindra Bhawan, Shantiniketan)

the manuscript, *Kheya*.[6] These early ventures combine two elements, namely, doodles and primitive art, that became Rabindranath's hallmark.

The question is: Why did Tagore renounce figurative art and go for abstraction with such gusto? After all, in his teens, he was devoted to academic naturalism. Around 1870s, on a visit to Paris, the young poet wrote admiringly of an academic nude by the fashionable French painter, Carolus-Duran, complaining that social prudery had drawn a veil over the beauty of the human body.[7] The first indication of change is his invitation to Kandinsky and other modernists to show in Calcutta in the year 1922. A quiet transformation of his outlook on art had begun even earlier. After winning the Nobel Prize, he started making periodic trips to countries in Asia as well as Europe, especially visiting Germany frequently in the 1920s. A remarkably receptive mind, there was much that he found attractive in Western modernism, especially the German avant-garde. He was drawn to German Primitivists such as Emil Nolde, but this sympathy, as we shall see, was part of a wider global critique of colonial/capitalist urban modernity.

Rabindranath's involvement with Western modernism must be set against the historical context of Indian response to colonial art. In the 1850s, academic naturalism was introduced through art schools by the colonial rulers on the model of the South Kensington School of Art in London. From that time onwards, the tides of westernization oscillated between enthusiasm for and resistance to academic art. Raja Ravi Varma, the princeling painter (1848–1906), who did not attend an art school, won India-wide fame with his nationalist history paintings in the Victorian mode that drew sustenance from the ancient epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (Mitter 1994: Parts I and II).

On the eve of the first major political unrest of 1905, namely, the Partition of Bengal, nationalist sentiment underwent a drastic change, giving rise to the demand for Swaraj (Self Rule) and Swadeshi (Indigenous). The generation of nationalist painters who followed Varma was no longer satisfied with Varma's Victorian mode of painting as adequate for imaging the emergent Indian nation. Abanindranath Tagore, their leader, created his own indigenous art by excavating visual languages from the past, notably the Mughal style, moving on to a Pan-Asian form of Oriental Art inspired by Japanese Morotai wash drawing (Mitter 1994: Chaps. 8 and 9). However, whether it was Ravi Varma or it was Abanindranath, in the final analysis, they were essentially historicist painters engaged in constructing an imaginary past for the nation. What they disagreed about was the visual language to adopt—academic naturalism or a two-dimensional form of oriental art.

The 1920s was a significant turning point in art, which saw a move away from history painting toward the present and to the countryside. Part of the reason was

[6] Ghosh (1973: 87), which speaks of how his friend Victoria Ocampo discovered his hidden talent when he was staying with her in Buenos Aires (translation of *Rabindranath on the Summit of San Isidro* by Ocampo).

[7] Tagore (1961: 398–399). Carolus-Duran was the assumed name of Charles-Emile-Auguste Durand, 1837–1917 (*The Dictionary of Art*: 812).

political: Mahatma Gandhi took charge of the nationalist movement in 1918, teaching middle class Indians to appreciate the importance of the peasant and the countryside, employing a language of “primitivism” that formed the basis of his anti-capitalist ideology of resistance to colonial rule. The political climate contra urban industrial capitalism became the driving force behind the first generation of the Indian avant-garde, that is, the period from the 1920s to the 1940s. “Primitivism” in the West had been a response to modernity—the romantic longing of a complex society for the simplicity of pre-modern existence, immortalized by the French painter Paul Gauguin. However, I would like to propose another definition of primitivism here, which, I suggest, offers a rich crop of possibilities. The crisis of the industrial age, which can be traced back to enlightenment rationality, made ardent primitivists of nineteenth century Romantics. Ironically, Indians and other colonized people also found primitivism immensely empowering, because it gave them a weapon to criticize urban industrial capitalism, the cornerstone of colonial empires. In the process of their resistance, they discovered allies in the West itself, who were equally critical of an unquestioned faith in modernity (Mitter 2007: 29–36).

This was also the background to Tagore’s own artistic ideology. The poet had been closely associated with the Swadeshi movement right from the beginning. His rejection of the urban modernity of colonial culture was first expressed in his seminal essay, “The Hermitage” (*Tapoban*), dated 1909.[8] As an alternative to what he saw as urban crisis, he proposed a critical form of modernity based on the ancient Indian notion of an integrated community defined by the rural hermitage. Rabindranath was eventually able to realize his dream of environmental primitivism at his experimental university in Santiniketan.

This notion of primitivism as a critical form of modernity drew Tagore to the Bauhaus artists. There are remarkable parallels between the ideas of Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus, and Tagore’s pedagogic theories. As someone who detested institutional education, Tagore was convinced that art could not be learned; it was a product of free creativity and experimentation. Tagore’s mystical pantheism was in sympathy with Gropius’ notion of the essential oneness of all things, as stated in Gropius’s manifesto, “The Theory and Organization of the Bauhaus” (2003: 309–314). Tagore’s holistic educational ideals of “integrated life” inspired by ancient Indian values had much in common with Gropius’ notion of organic equilibrium. Therefore, it is not surprising at all that Tagore’s European tour of 1921 included a visit to Franz Cizek’s art class for children in Vienna (Mitter 2007: 74). A pioneer of children’s education, Cizek encouraged the growth of the whole person rather than the mastery of technological knowledge, a sentiment enthusiastically shared by Rabindranath.

The point I am driving home is simply this: Tagore was less interested in the actual paintings of the German Expressionists than in their critical approach to

[8] The essay, ‘Tapoban’ was published in *Prabasi* in 1316 (1909), see *Rabindra Rachanabali*, XI, 589–606.

modernity, which fitted in very well with Tagore's own anti-colonial ideology. In short, the common objective of Tagore and the European artists was their artistic primitivism which sought to counter the alienation of modern urban life that the capitalist system had given rise to. A powerful expression of this form of critical modernity was Rabindranath's pedagogic theories applied at Santiniketan.

Yet, the striking fact is that, when we come to actual paintings by Rabindranath Tagore, we find that he had left politics behind. A fierce opponent of a narrow and extreme Hindu nationalism, Tagore did not seek out the primitive as an affirmation of Indian nationhood, as was done by other contemporary painters. His use of "primitive" masks and totemic animals was a ludic exploration of the unconscious rather than a political statement. It was essentially a personal statement even though informed by his wider cosmopolitan ideology.[9]

The hastily organized exhibition of Rabindranath Tagore's paintings opened at the avant-garde Galerie du Théâtre Pigalle on May 2, 1930, alongside an exhibition of African and Oceanic art. It contained paintings of masks, lovers, fantasy architecture, landscapes, and imaginary animals, including the well-known "bird sitting on an unwieldy humanoid beast" and a "nude woman riding a flying monster."[10] In that year, Tagore's paintings travelled to other parts of Europe and to the USA, after the judgement of Paris. Georges Rivière, Curator of the Trocadéro Museum, and a close friend of the modernists, considered Rabindranath Tagore to be a modern primitive. He placed Rabindranath's show next to an exhibition of Oceanic art held in the same museum, thus suggesting affinities between Rabindranath's work and primitive art (Fig. 7.3). The poet's lack of technical skill, his childlike simplifications, and his "stream of consciousness" treatment appealed to the Western avant-garde, attuned to primitive and child art. The French art critic, Henri Bidou, a champion of the Surrealists, wrote an influential review comparing Rabindranath's Tagore's automatic painting with that of the Surrealists.[11]

In the West, few countries could rival the interest generated by his paintings in Germany. The Germans felt a special affinity with the Indian struggle for freedom from British rule because of their own defeat in the War of 1914–1918. In 1924, the critic Max Osborn reviewed an important exhibition of the paintings of the nationalist Bengal School held in Berlin, where he compared India's quest for

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[9] Parimoo (1973) is a pioneering work on Rabindranath's art. Archer, who admired Tagore's paintings also offered us insights into his use of unconscious. Thanks to them we know what primitive sources Tagore used, but when we pose the question why he used them, only then do we begin to realize the wider global implications of his work. In fact, we need to go beyond style to appreciate the importance of Tagore in Indian modernism.

[10] On Rivière, see Rubin (1984: 162–163). Philip Connisbee in a recent lecture mentioned Rivière's support for Cézanne. The show was held under the auspices of the Association des amis de L'Orient, which had a long connection with the Tagore through Susanne and Andrée Karpelès (Parimoo: 121–122), the year the poet was to deliver the Hibbert Lectures at Oxford. On the number of works shown, see Tagore's letter to Rothenstein (1939).

[11] See Mitter (2007: 66) on Henri Bidou.



Fig. 7.3 View of the exposition of African and Oceanic Art at the Gallery Pigalle. Courtesy: Société Française de Photographie, Paris

cultural regeneration with the struggle for the validation of the German soul.[12] Many of the German critics, already sympathetic to Indian culture, considered Rabindranath's paintings to herald the victory of non-illusionist art, similar in spirit to the works of the Expressionists. Tagore's works were displayed in major galleries in Berlin, Munich, and Dresden. Ludwig Justi, an influential government official who had been responsible for organizing the 1924 Bengal School show, planned to acquire Tagore's works for the National Gallery in Berlin.[13] Among many reviews, let me take one that gives us their flavor. The *Vossiche Zeitung* compared Tagore's manner of piercing through outer reality with that of modern European artists, particularly Munch and Nolde, as well as praising Tagore's free play in the manner of Klee. The reviewer discovered "an association of ideas" between these Indian abstractions and modern European ones (Mitter 2007: 69).

This is only the briefest account of the enormously successful reception of his paintings in the West. Let us now consider in some depth the actual works themselves. Rabindranath Tagore produced some two thousand paintings from the late 1920s until the year of his death in 1941. His works can be classified into two kinds: the more decorative ones that emerged from transformations of his written texts, and ones that deployed human and animal imagery; both were produced with pelican pens, enhanced with a limited palette of watercolor washes, very much a writer's

[12] See *Rupam* (1923: 74) for Max Osborn's review. The Bauhaus in Kalkutta exhibition (2013) displays a facsimile of the catalogue of the exhibition in Germany. I am indebted to the research of Boris Friedewald and other members of the team.

[13] Reporters from Hamburg, Breslau, Leipzig, Baden, Vienna, and even distant Budapest attended the show. L. Thormachten's letter on behalf of the National Gallery to Möller Gallery, expressed interest in acquiring the works chosen by Justi through unable to pay for them. Tagore in letter to Justi of August 16, 1930, donated the works as a token of German hospitality (*Foreign Comments*, Archived in Rabindra Bhawan, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan).



Fig. 7.4 Rabindranath Tagore, Untitled (Woman), ink on paper, c. 1930 (Rabindra Bhawan, Shantiniketan)

preference (Fig. 7.4). I have already spoken of the genesis of his art in crossed-out texts and automatic doodles. But there was a strong underlying structure in these pictorial meditations. The poet was familiar with the Austro-German Jugendstil, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco illustrations that had been popular in Bengal. He turned to them to create a synthesis of word and image by using text pages as his creative springboard. The poet belonged to a self-conscious literary milieu that prized elegant calligraphy, his own beautiful Bengali handwriting emulated by many. The decorative possibilities of his own writing gave him the initial idea for creating independent forms. Yet, even though his springboard was the text page, the meaning of the text was ultimately sacrificed in the finished drawing; it became an independent work of art in its own right. There are fascinating parallels between Tagore and Adolf Hölzel, the Austrian graphic artist, both of whom created innovative designs by incorporating written texts in a work of art. Hölzel was the author of "creative automatism," and was an influence in Weimar. I do not think they knew one another and yet they shared many of the ideas about text and image.[14]

The second element both of them searched for were the formal values of line and rhythm. Tagore's economical forms and sparing colors were held together by a flowing rhythmical line that grew out of his calligraphic experiments. He transformed text pages into works of art, searching for the formal beauties of line and

[14] For Hölzel's composition with writing see Häenlein (1982), for several examples of Komposition mit Schrift (1900: Fig. 129, p. 76) and (1920: Fig. 188, p. 52).

rhythm. He insisted in his essays that he did not wish to represent an object but searched for the "rhythmic significance of form." A poet and a composer of songs and dance-dramas, Tagore was acutely sensitive to rhythm, describing the universe in 1916 as an "endless rhythm of lines and colours." Just before his German exhibition, Tagore reflected on his work method: "I try to make my corrections dance [and] connect them in a rhythmic relationship…" (1961c: 100). Similarly Hölzel spoke of the "inner rhythm of the soul," and of line as a form of energy, urging artists to study the "linear expressive movement."

However, if one were to seek differences between them it is that Tagore was a poet first and foremost and Hölzel was primarily an artist. Tagore's use of texts was a logical extension of his interest in the written word and the calligraphic beauty of the line. Somewhat similar to the Bengali poet's doodles, the Austrian artist's abstract ornaments were often placed alongside handwritten texts. He also incorporated printed texts in his doodles and designs, sometimes supplying his own texts for them.[15]

Tagore's transition from this decorative art to the next phase was quite telling. What took him to a more radical modernist plane was his discovery of Native American, Oceanic and African ritual masks, totemic animals, face "scars," and body tattoos (Fig. 7.5) He had come across these in popular anthropological books. We may remind ourselves here that often Tagore's sources were not actual paintings as such but their reproductions in books. In fact, the importance of the printed image in colonial experience has yet to be studied. Secondly, it may surprise us that for his primitivist imagery, Tagore did not turn to the tribal arts of India, let alone that of the Santhals, who had featured in his literature. But this is nothing unusual. Tribal art had not yet been discovered by anthropologists such as Verrier Elwin. Instead Tagore combed global anthropological literature for his subjects, his favorites being the totemic art of the North American Haida people and of Oceania. Indeed, Tagore's interest in the primitive may well reflect the growing awareness of tribal people around the world.

Rabindranath's visual repertoire was circumscribed by his limited experience in art practice. He returned again and again to his favorite subjects: masks, mask-like faces, lugubrious animals, strange monsters, and landscapes often with architectural elements in them. The later landscapes and still lives are less experimental and lose his earlier spontaneity. One of the most intriguing subjects, though sparse in number, is nudes of varying erotic significance. One would argue that Freud played a major role in the poet's new interest in art, a fact that had been noted in passing by the pioneering art historian, Archer (1959: 49–79). Freud had provided a new insight into automatic drawing and children's art, thus offering an unprecedented creative potential to artists such as Paul Klee. In this connection, it is intriguing that Tagore asked Freud to visit him at his hotel in Vienna on October 25, 1926, but the poet never disclosed what transpired between them (Jones 1957: 128). But there can be no doubt

[15] See Parris (1979: 154–161), who discusses in detail Hölzel's method.

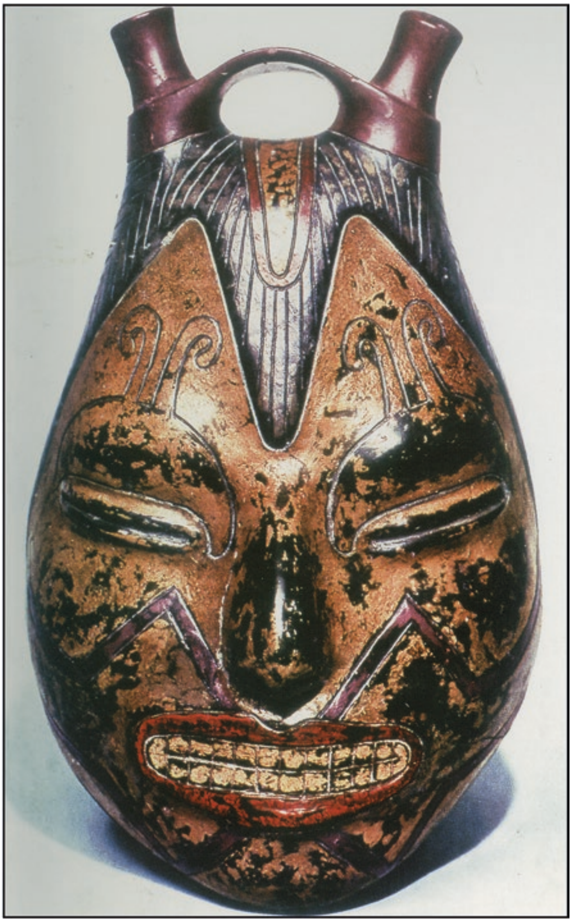


Fig. 7.5 Peru, clay bottle in the shape of a trophy head

about the shadow of Freud in Tagore's poetic descriptions of the apparitions, phantasmagoric creatures, and nightmarish shapes that lived his pictorial world.

Let us now consider Rabindranath Tagore's professed lack of artistic skill, which played a central role in the poet's self-presentation. There was a certain diffidence in him faced with professional artists such as William Rothenstein or Nandalal Bose whose opinion he respected. However, there was also an inner confidence in his use of firm lines and fluid brush-strokes. Admittedly, Tagore's experience in naturalistic representation was limited but in his case this was not necessary for his purposes. His skills may have been modest, but his paintings reveal artistic control, a strong sense of formal design, and an ability to discard unnecessary details. Yet, Tagore described his work "as the unconscious courage of the unsophisticated, like someone who walks in a dream." This was not diffidence on his part. He wished to stress that his art was a recapitulation of his childhood. Tagore felt the need to "regress" to childhood in order to recover

spontaneity. We can think of parallels here with artists such as Paul Klee, who also sought to learn from their own childhood drawings (Francisco 1998: 95–121).

There is indeed a significant passage in Tagore's memoirs which hints at this childhood experience: "I lay with my face to the wall; the faint light drew myriad patterns on whitewashed walls, helped by the pockmarks left by the peeling paint. I put myself to sleep imagining weird shapes and creatures" (1961: 50). Rabindranath gave a Freudian explanation of his artistic process as a series of accidental discoveries, rather than an outcome of premeditation. He repeatedly emphasized two other elements, "unpredictability" and "dream imagery." Ambiguity, unpredictability, and accident invested Tagore's images with an enigmatic quality. We are all aware today that the accidental and dream imagery are very much the stuff of modernism. He encouraged at Santiniketan this spontaneous quality in children's art, an idea endorsed by the Austrian educationist Franz Cizek, who was close to the Austrian avant-garde. In his introduction to his painting, Tagore claimed to possess the unconscious courage of the unsophisticated, like "one who walks in a dream on a perilous path" (Tagore 1961c: 97). In the last year of his life, he felt the need to confide in the painter, Jamini Roy, seeing in him a kindred spirit: "when I started my painting, the flora and fauna of this universe began to appear before me in their true forms. I represented these true forms" (Dey 1977: 86). It is quite significant that they shared an antipathy to colonial urbanity and preferred a return to the countryside.

Tagore's images dredged up from the depths of his psyche—primitive masks, deformed monsters, and erotic encounters: their dark mood of alienation link him up directly with modernism, its anxieties, its ambivalences, and its fractured consciousness, a radical imagination rarely to be found in Indian art during the colonial period. In colonial India ambiguity and dissonance as artistic devices were absent in academic art or in the nationalist allegories of the Bengal School. More to the point, modernist issues of alienation and displacement had not originally formed part of Tagore's "mimetic" literary corpus. His mystical lyricism, expressed in a late romantic language replete with metaphor, simile, allegory and other literary ornaments, was governed by a strict decorum rooted in Victorian evangelism. From the late 1920s, with failing health, disappointments and a sense of loss, the aging poet began to question these very same esthetic standards. The younger generation of modernist poets in Bengal, such as Bishnu Dey and Sudhindranath Datta, preferred the fragmentation and dissonance of modern life to his Olympian prose and emotionally charged poetry. They quietly ignored him. A letter dated 1928 already hints at his loss of poetic inspiration, as lines began to cast a spell on him. Tagore felt liberated from the "high" canon of good taste, over which he had presided for many years in Bengal, producing some two thousand paintings (Tagore 1961c: 87, 89).

For a poet known for his worship of beauty, truth, and goodness, Tagore's pictorial nightmares unequivocally rejected the "conventionally" beautiful; the images that plumbed the dark depths were primal and transgressive. In 1927, he sought reassurance from the European modernists, and he felt heartened that they

too deliberately expunged the good and the beautiful from their art. He was hurt by the faint praise of his art by Nandalal Bose and others who were close to him.

One of the most tantalisingly ambiguous motifs in Tagore is the primitive mask. Masks, after all, are meant to conceal one's identity—we are thus left with some unanswered questions: What do they reveal or conceal? (Fig. 7.6). Tagore also tried his hand at nudes which were anything but conventional in their raw power. Tagore never hesitated to exalt physical beauty in his writings; we may recall his admiration for a late nineteenth century nude. Nonetheless, if Tagore introduced erotic images in his "mimetic" literature, they were oblique, allegorical, and intensely mystical. These paintings, however, were entirely different in their effect. In terms of their disturbing suggestiveness, no other works of Tagore came close to the small enigmatic group of what I have called "erotic" paintings that offer us glimpses of unresolved inner tensions. They are not overtly erotic but rather deeply suggestive—subliminal and quite Freudian in their suggestions of domination and submission as part of a primordial struggle (Mitter 2007: 77) (Fig. 7.7).

The justification Tagore offered for his primitivism was self-expression, which was part and parcel of the Romantic revolt against the esthetics of "effects." Even as early as 1916, his comments recall the credo of Expressionism: Art mediated between the outside world and inner forces and was not a representation of



Fig. 7.6 Rabindranath Tagore, Untitled (Woman), color on paper, c. 1930 (Rabindra Bhawan, Shantiniketan)

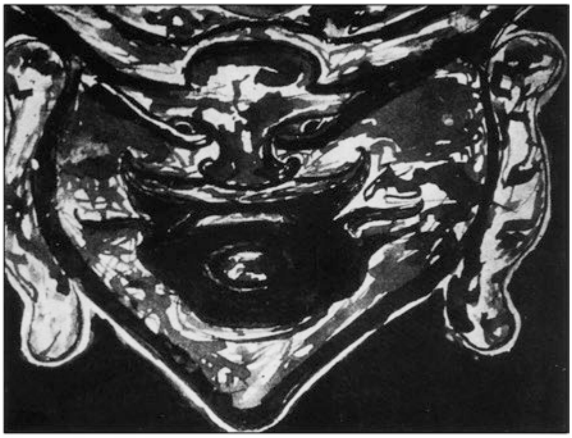




Fig. 7.7 Rabindranath Tagore, Masks, ink on paper. Plate 723, 724 (above and below), c. 1930 and 1929 respectively (Rabindra Bhawan, Shantiniketan)

objects. From around 1928, he took an increasingly formalist view of art in his critical writings, for instance politely refusing to explain the meaning of his works at the India Society in London in 1930: "People often ask me about the meaning of my pictures. I remain silent even as they are. It is for them to express and not to explain…"[16]

[16] Tagore, 'My Pictures (III)', in Neogy, 104.

Tagore's paintings, the last crop in the evening of his life, were surprisingly vital, exuding remarkable energy and inventiveness, though perhaps the very late ones began to get more naturalistic and therefore less formally striking. After his international debut with fanfare as an artist in 1930, he held only one major show in Calcutta. Then public interest in his painting, at least in the West, faded, in part because of the darkening horizon that presaged war. He retired to his hermitage at Santiniketan, continuing to pour out his creativity in his painting, right down to the time of his death. His meteoric rise as a painter was unprecedented but his disciples and close associates were more ambivalent about his achievement. What is his position in the history of modern Indian art? He is regarded as one of the pioneers of Indian modernism, admired by major painters such as K.G. Subramanian. However, his legacy remains in people's minds, rather inspiring any younger generation of painters to emulate him. I have no answer to the question as to why he had no followers except to leave this suggestion: Were his nonrepresentational paintings too radical for his times? We shall never know.

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Chapter 8
Why Ratan Fell in Love Unnoticed and Why Ashu was Ashamed: Tagore's Short Fiction and the Ethics of Feeling

Patrick Hogan

Abstract This essay begins with general reflections on the cognitive and affective structures and processes that give rise to stories in the minds of authors. Turning to Tagore, it seeks to isolate some of the narrative, emotional, and ethical properties that characterize his stories. The central argument is that many of Tagore's short narratives are guided by a sort of "proto-story" that involves standard narrative elements—crucially, attachment bonding and the disruption of attachment bonding—as well as recurring ethical principles. The key Tagorean virtues in this proto-story are what may be called "attachment sensitivity" and "attachment openness." The former is an enhanced, effortful empathy with other people's attachment vulnerabilities; the latter is a willingness to experience attachment vulnerability oneself.

Keywords Literary theory · Rabindranath Tagore · Affect · Story structure · Attachment · Ethics

One of Tagore's most famous short stories begins with a young man being sent from Calcutta to a distant village, where he will serve as postmaster. An orphaned girl, Ratan, cooks and cleans for him. Alone and isolated, he talks with the girl, telling her about his family, asking about hers. He eventually begins to teach her how to read. When the young man falls gravely ill, Ratan selflessly undertakes his care. After he recuperates, Ratan expects the former routine to resume. However, the postmaster no longer calls to her for their talks or lessons. Rather, he writes to Calcutta, applying for another post. His application is refused. Nonetheless, he decides to leave. He finally calls to Ratan, only to announce his departure. He tells her that he will be sure the new postmaster treats her well. He also tries to give her money. In both cases, she feels insulted and angry. On leaving, he remembers her

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"grief-stricken face" (46),[1] but reflects "philosophically that in life there are many separations" (46–47). Ratan, however, lacks this consolation.

Most readers of Tagore would probably recognize that this story is very characteristic of its author—in its structure, its feeling, and its ethical concerns. But it is difficult to say just what properties define these commonalities, just what leads to this characteristic quality. It seems likely that the ethical part would be particularly difficult to articulate. Clearly, there is something wrong with the postmaster's blunted sensibilities and his self-serving reflections on the departing boat. But what makes these concerns typical of Tagore?

8.1 The Source of Stories

Before considering Tagore, however, it is necessary to understand something more about the way authors produce stories; it is necessary to have at least some sense of what might be called *narrative idiolects*. People produce speech from the principles of their linguistic idiolects. In the same way, people–most obviously authors–may be said to produce stories from the principles of their narrative idiolects.

More exactly, we all have a range of semantic structures, from fairly abstract schemas, to more concrete average cases or prototypes, to particular instances of categories or exemplars. As semantic structures, these are simultaneously inferential and evaluative. For example, we use the prototype of a dog to infer things about Spot (e.g., that he is a carnivore), to initially identify Spot as a dog, to evaluate Spot's appearance and behavior, and so on. Moreover, these semantic structures are not confined to cognitive operation, but interact in complex ways with our emotional propensities and sensitivities. The point applies whether we are talking about dogs or poems or people. Each of us has ideas about dogs and feelings about them; ideas about poetry and feelings about poems. To some extent, these ideas and feelings are ephemeral, changing in particular circumstances and with our passing moods. In other words, in some respects, our feelings about poetry or friends vary with contingent circumstances. But to some extent these ideas and feelings—and their interrelations with one another—are constant. For example, due to unpleasant past experiences, when I am running I distrust dogs, particularly those not on a leash. Relatively enduring networks of inferential patterns and emotional sensitivities may be called "expectancy structures" (insofar as they apply to the future) or "interpretation structures" (insofar as they apply to the present or past).

Consider the category, "friend." We have certain abstract ideas of what properties define friends (e.g., that they are loyal). We also have a prototype of friends, a standard case (e.g., prototypical friends are probably of the same sex and in the same age group). Finally, we have instances of friends, particular cases—our own

[1] Unless otherwise noted, citations of Tagore's stories refer to Radice.

or others', real or literary (e.g., Tagore's Binoy and Gora). Categorizing someone as a friend involves having certain expectations about him or her. Those expectations are not merely intellectual; they involve often quite strong feelings. For example, in times of difficulty, I expect a friend to support me more vigorously and consistently than some indifferent bystander. That expectation is in part a matter of reasoning, but it is also a matter of my feeling of trust.

As the preceding example suggests, a key aspect of expectancy structures is that they involve preferences—"preferred final outcomes" as Ed Tan might put it. I do not simply expect my friend to support me in the way I expect a ball to drop to the ground when I let go. I anticipate my friend's loyalty with hope. Moreover, this anticipation is bound up with close attention to his behavior, including clues about his own emotional response, his feelings about the situation, and about me. In fact, as this indicates, the same point holds for interpretation structures.

In this way, expectancy and interpretation structures may involve a sort of narrative interest, even suspense. Indeed, each of these structures forms a sort of abstract story, a kind of plot. For example, our expectancy structures for a friend may include such scenarios as the following: When someone is dejected and socially isolated, a (true) friend will remain loyal and helpful, even in the face of social disapproval. When activated by a particular context, these plots organize and orient our response to the world. We may then say that both expectancy and interpretation structures are inseparable from "narratives of understanding," or, more briefly, *proto-stories*. Proto-stories are cognitive/affective complexes that incorporate inferential structures as well as our emotional sensitivities and propensities. They guide how we think about particular sequences of events, project consequences, calculate causes, infer motives; they partially regulate what emotion systems are activated in each case, and so on.

It seems fairly clear that proto-stories are crucial in our ordinary lives, in the way we respond to our spouses at home, our colleagues at work, strangers in shops or restaurants. Indeed, it seems fairly clear that, in a wide range of cases, this complex level of structure is more important than the lower, more "atomic" level of its components–schemas (abstract semantic structures defining general principles for category membership), prototypes (average cases of a category), and so on. We would expect to find the same predominance of proto-stories in the production of narratives by professional storytellers. Indeed, it is precisely these proto-stories that account for the recurring structural patterns that we tacitly recognize as characteristic of an author's work, as in the case of Tagore's "The Postmaster."[2]

[2] Writers who have recognized something along the lines of proto-stories frequently wish to relate all an author's works to a single structure. For example, William Butler Yeats writes that "I have often had the fancy that there is some one myth for every man, which, if we but knew it, would make us understand all he did and thought" (102). The present analysis shares with Yeats the view that there are narrative patterns that recur across an author's work. This is an important similarity, perhaps supporting the validity of the general idea. However, the two accounts differ greatly in the degree to which they reduce the diversity of an author's work, as well as in the precise nature of the patterns isolated and the explanatory principles bearing on those patterns.

8.2 Attachment Sensitivity and Attachment Openness

The first thing to remark in treating Tagore's proto-stories is that, for Tagore, as for many other writers, there is a sort of master emotion, an emotion that underlies and orients our most enduring and consequential social emotions. In explicit theories, we find this with some frequency. For Thomas Scheff, for example, the master emotion is shame (see Scheff and Retzinger). For Freud, it is sexual desire. John Bowlby's work suggests that it is attachment, the relation of bonding between parents and children. This last is roughly what the ancient Sanskrit literary theorists referred to as *vãtsalya* ("affection or tenderness (esp. toward offspring)" [Monier-Williams 939; see also 869]). In literature, it is the feeling that animates poetic depictions of children, as in some ancient Tamil poems (see, for example, Hart 179) or many stories of the child Krsna (where it is, of course, fused with *bhakti* or devotion as well). Of these options, attachment seems the most plausible, for attachment lies at the developmental basis of our emotional experience. Our entire emotional lives stem from childhood experiences and those experiences occur in the context of close, attachment-based interaction with caregivers. Indeed, a central part of that interaction is a sort of emotional calibration in which our affective responses to the world are shaped and oriented by the sharing of emotions with caregivers.

Tagore in some ways anticipated work on attachment by (tacitly) viewing parent/child affection—and the related affection of friends or spouses—as a sort of master emotion. Of course, Tagore did not formulate an explicit theory of attachment. But he put attachment, with its various components, at the center of his implicit esthetics and ethics. Attachment involves trust, care-giving, the enhancement of empathy for the attachment object, the inhibition of disgust, and the development of what may be called "reward dependency." The reward system in the human brain is connected with "the immediate pleasurable aspects of natural rewards," as well as "the arousal effects that are predictive of impending rewards" (Kupfermann, Kandel, and Iversen 1009). It is the system that is activated in addiction and that produces the pain of the addict's withdrawal from a drug. It is also a system involved in love (see, for example, Fisher 90) and is connected with the terrible suffering that results from loss of one's beloved (see Stein and Vythilingum 240).

Perhaps in part because he implicitly recognized the deep hurt that results from attachment loss, Tagore saw attachment as not only emotionally, but also ethically central. It may seem that emotion is not part of ethical decision, which is, rather, guided by general principles of conduct. However, if ethical principles are going to result in action, they must have motivating force. That motivating force comes from emotion. Indeed, a wide range of ethical orientations privilege one or another emotion. For example, anger is one prominent emotion activated in tacit ethical systems that stress defense of the home or homeland. When ethical evaluation focuses on sexual sins, then disgust is often foregrounded (see Chap. 7 of Hogan's *What*). Some creative writers have privileged attachment. This is true not only in their treatment of emotion

per se, with its explanatory consequences for human behavior, but also in their ethics. Perhaps the best-known case is Harriet Beecher Stowe, who constantly stressed how slavery separated families (see, for example, 139). Again, Tagore was one of these writers. Both the explanatory and normative elements of attachment were crucial for the development of Tagore's narrative of understanding in this case.

As to explanation, Tagore seems to have anticipated Bowlby's vision of a close relation between secure childhood attachment relations and a contented adulthood, though Tagore may have given that contentment a more Vedāntic inflection relating to śānti (peace). In any case, there is a sort of natural development of secure attachment into the ease and satisfaction of adult relationships. But, again like Bowlby, Tagore recognized that this development is continually open to disruption. Formulated as a partial proto-story, then, we have the beginnings of a simple explanatory system: *Human suffering—and narrative tragedy—often result from some disruption of the normal course of secure attachment development*.

The ethical obligations in this tacit proto-story are already suggested by the basic explanatory structure. Specifically, there are two fundamental moral duties here. The first is to maximize the likelihood of children developing secure attachment relations. The second is to minimize the likelihood that these attachments will be disrupted in later life.

There are, of course, two perspectives on attachment; it is important to distinguish them here. The first is the perspective of caregivers. The second is the perspective of everyone else. We have very different *concrete* obligations to our own children than we have to the children of strangers. I stress the word "concrete" because the general obligations (fostering secure attachment relations and inhibiting disruption of those relations) are the same. The same general obligations work out differently due to the specific rights and responsibilities that guide who can do what for whom in a given society. The caregiver/non-caregiver distinction also bears on people's spontaneous attachment feelings. I simply cannot comfort a stray child in the way that I can comfort my own child, since only the latter has attachment feelings for me. Moreover, a key component of a caregiver's relation to a child is the caregiver's own attachment to the child. In other words, the child not only needs efficient care (food when hungry, and so on). The child wants attachment reciprocity; the child wants the parent's love. This is an important part of someone's attachment security not only with respect to caregivers (prototypically, one's parents), but also parallel figures in later life (e.g., a spouse).

This analysis points toward two fundamental ethical attitudes, two emotional orientations that are perhaps the crucial ethical points in Tagore's attachment proto-story. We may refer to these as "attachment sensitivity" and "attachment openness." Attachment sensitivity is the more basic of the two. It involves an enhanced empathic vigilance with respect to other people's attachment needs. In most cases, those needs will not bear on us individually. However, when they do, then the second orientation enters. Being open to attachment means that allowing one's own feelings to develop in relation to the attachment vulnerabilities of others. Of course, there are always complications here. There are cases where the attachment can reasonably be developed in one way, but not another (e.g., in the

way of vātsalya, but not romantic love); there are cases where the development of attachment conflicts with other pressing moral obligations. But the point of a moral orientation is not that it should always supersede all other considerations. The point is that it is a good in itself and should be followed when other things are equal.

8.3 The Postmaster

We may now return to "The Postmaster." At the start of this essay, we noted that this story appears typical of Tagore in its structure, feeling, and ethics. Now we are in a position to indicate why this is the case.

The story begins with a child who has suffered a severe disruption in attachment relations by being orphaned. Her subsequent behavior suggests that her relation with her parents had initially developed into a secure attachment bond (i.e., her relation with the postmaster does not suggest insecurity). She seems to have had a particularly secure and affectionate bond with her father, who, she recalls, "loved her more than her mother did" (43). Nonetheless, this security is clearly threatened by the loss of her parents.

She is "twelve or thirteen" (42), thus marriageable age for her society. In this way, she could be in the position of acquiring new attachment relations to replace those with her parents. Indeed, this is what she would (socially) expect at that age. Those new attachment relations would include both the husband himself and the husband's family in her new home. Unfortunately, it "seemed unlikely that she would get married" (42). This is presumably due in part to the lack of a dowry—itself connected with the death of her parents. It becomes clear quickly that the girl finds an attachment substitute, for her father particularly, in the postmaster. This is the sort of substitute she should have found in a husband. When he converses with her about his life, she reacts like a new bride learning about her husband's family. Indeed, "Ratan referred to the postmaster's family… as if they were her own" and "even formed affectionate imaginary pictures of them" (43). So the initial situation of the story involves a secure attachment relation that is disrupted and that shows some possibilities for repair. The relation of the two characters is intensified by subsequent events. First, the postmaster takes up the role of father in committing himself to the girl's education. Second, the girl takes up the role of mother in nursing the postmaster back to health. Thus, they share the parental, care-giving roles in a way that is quite appropriate for a mature and secure attachment relation.

As all this indicates, the pervasive emotion (or rasa) of the story is attachment. Moreover, the great ethical dilemma is preserving the girl's attachment security. This ethical dilemma marks the narrative crux of the story. The reader is likely to feel that the postmaster has an ethical obligation to the girl. But it is not an obligation that can be repaid with rupees. It is an emotional obligation, or rather two obligations—attachment sensitivity and attachment openness. The further development of the story results from the postmaster neglecting those obligations. Most

importantly, he evidences a complete lack of attachment sensitivity. He seems oblivious to the girl's feelings and reduces her grief to worry over whether the new postmaster will treat her well. He also exhibits no openness to attachment. Indeed, he thinks constantly about the attachments he lacks, but does not allow himself to form an attachment with this girl. Finally, he uses abstract philosophical thought to rationalize his decision to leave and thus to inhibit the empathic response he is inclined to feel for her grief.

Our preliminary understanding of Tagore's proto-story of attachment, thus allows us to organize and understand "The Postmaster" more fully. But, at the same time, this story allows us to extend our understanding of the proto-story. Specifically, it suggests a structure in which the attachment security of some vulnerable character is threatened in specific ways. A second, less vulnerable character is in a position to extend or inhibit that threat, depending on his or her attachment sensitivity and/or attachment openness. If he or she fails, the narrative moves toward grief and rationalization.

It is important to note that both the initial threat (due to the girl's loss of her parents and her poor likelihood of marriage) and its subsequent intensification (due to the postmaster's departure) do not derive primarily from individual preferences. Rather, they derive from social routines with their coercive forces. It is those routines and forces that break in on the otherwise natural development of secure attachment. Again, the girl's inability to marry is undoubtedly bound up with her lack of a dowry. Moreover, even if the postmaster had been more sensitive and open to attachment, in practice this could not have developed like a Hollywood romantic comedy. The social obstacles in the way of a relation between the postmaster and Ratan were probably insuperable. Indeed, we may infer that social hierarchies are even at the root of Ratan's initial loss of her parents. Their premature death was presumably not unrelated to their low economic status.

8.4 Expanding the Proto-Story: Deliberate Disruptions

Needless to say, Tagore's narrative options were not confined to the proto-story we have been considering. First, he undoubtedly had a number of different proto-stories. This particular affective structure was deeply important for his writing, but not unique. Moreover, as already noted, all such complex inferential and affective structures undergo reconfiguration in different contexts, and they are open to many different sorts of specification. Thus, we find a story such as "The Wife's Letter"[3] in which a young woman, Mrinal, is brought together with a helpless, orphaned girl. The girl, Bindu, becomes attached to Mrinal, very much as Ratan becomes attached to the postmaster. The subsequent development of the story is similar too, but more tragic. Bindu is married off to a madman, since there are few other options for her.

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[3] In Chaudhuri.

Unfortunately, she cannot bear her new life, a life entirely deprived of attachment security. Finding no escape, she kills herself. But this in turn leads Mrinal to a new realization. Though nothing can be done now for Bindu, she can still liberate herself from the gender constraints that, in part, led to the girl's death. The letter (which comprises the text of the story) explores and explains this process of self-liberation. It is a sort of inverse parallel to the postmaster's rationalization after leaving Ratan. "The Wife's Letter" brings up two issues in our understanding of Tagore's attachment proto-story. First, it introduces genuine cruelty. Despite his violations of Tagorean ethics, it seems unlikely that many readers would take the postmaster to be positively bad (rather than morally negligent). Tagore's proto-story is, on the whole, a relatively gentle one, as we would expect from its ethics of attachment. But it is not naïve. It does allow for more active engagement in harm.

Second, the inhibitions we considered in "The Postmaster" were the result of political economy and social constraint. That is largely, but not entirely true of "The Wife's Letter." As Marxist theorists have rightly stressed, conformity of behavior results from internal as well as external pressures, thus ideology as well as economics or repression (see, for example, Althusser; for a fuller discussion, see Hogan *Culture*). The same point holds for the disruption of attachment security. The disruption itself, or the attachment insensitivity and withdrawal that sustain that disruption, may result from outside force or from constraints of the mind. Perhaps the most powerful internal constraints on attachment—and on the empathy that is crucial for attachment sensitivity—come from in-group/out-group divisions. These divisions are formed by identity categorizations, which is to say, sorting people into groups by reference to putatively defining characteristics. Prominent identity categories include race, nationality, religion, and, perhaps most fundamentally, sex. This is in part what the young woman realizes at the end of "The Wife's Letter."

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the last identity category, sex. Patriarchal societies define individuals fundamentally on the basis of sex. They institute various sorts of practices and teachings to lead people to identify themselves and others, first and foremost, as male and female. Obviously, there are contexts in which we are naturally inclined to categorize people sexually. The point is not that sex categories are simply created by social ideology. However, people in patriarchal societies tend to see one's sex category as relevant in virtually all circumstances and at virtually all times. Moreover, people in such societies tend to associate a wide range of nonsexual attributes (e.g., intelligence) and norms (e.g., chastity) with gender divisions.

Sex categorization is particularly important for our purposes because part of patriarchal gender ideology involves attachment. Attachment sensitivity and attachment openness are prototypically "feminine" characteristics. In the case of female gender socialization, this sensitivity and openness must be limited, shaped so as not to violate other group divisions. Crucially, these propensities should be constrained by national or related divisions in the case of war, where attachment sensitivity risks leading to pacifism. But the danger in these cases is far more severe for men, who are typically the soldiers in such wars. Thus, the social constraints on attachment sensitivity and openness are far more rigorous for men.

One of the most important tasks for gender ideology, then, is to inhibit men's natural inclinations toward attachment sensitivity and attachment openness. This is one of the key features of patriarchal gender ideology that is so forcefully criticized in Tagore's fiction. In this fundamental narrative of understanding that underlies so much of Tagore's literary imagination, the enforcement of gender ideology mangles and perverts the natural development of secure attachment relations. This mangling and perversion are poignantly expressed in "Housewife."

8.5 Housewife

"Housewife" begins with Shibanath, a "malevolent" teacher (54) who insults his pupils. It is clear from the outset that Shibanath is an antitype, a model of just how adults should not behave toward children. Significantly, just as a parent may give his or her child an affectionate nickname, Shibanath renames his pupils, but in mockery.

After presenting the reader with background about Shibanath and his class, the narrator explains that he is going to tell the story of the gentle, well-behaved Ashu. In keeping with Tagore's attachment concerns, Ashu is the youngest—thus, in a sense, most vulnerable—student in the class (55). The teacher nicknames him "Housewife." Upon reading this, we might guess that the purpose of this nickname is to enforce a gender role. As the story unfolds, we learn that this is the case.

Specifically, "Ashu had a little sister. She had no friend or cousin of her own age, so Ashu was her only playmate" (56). The point is crucial. Ashu's sister had no proper attachment relation for sharing the emotional engagement of play (on the importance of emotion sharing, see Rimé). Ashu, despite his youth, exhibits the perfect ethical behavior by Tagore's standards. He is sensitive to his sister's attachment needs and he is open to developing his attachment relation with her. In consequence, when they have a holiday, he spends the entire afternoon, playing "the wedding-day of his sister's doll" (56).

At this point, then, the relation between the siblings is a successfully developing attachment relation with attachment security. Moreover, their play represents and shares the formation of another attachment relation in the wedding. Finally, this attachment bonding is enabled by the natural (but nonetheless ethically consequential) responsiveness of the older sibling, thus the less vulnerable of the two people involved.

But, as we might expect, here a complication enters. Shibanath witnesses this play. As a result, he gives the boy his nickname ("Housewife") and recounts the incident to the boy's (male) classmates. The boys proceed to chant mockingly, "Housewife, housewife!" (57). The result is, to my mind, one of the most pathetic and morally chilling moments in all of Tagore's fiction. On being subjected to this treatment, Ashu "realized that to play with your little sister on a school holiday was the most shameful thing in the world" (57).

What Ashu learns—not merely inferentially, but emotionally, motivationally—is that he must dull his sensitivity to attachment and narrow his openness to attachment if he is to be a man, rather than a "housewife." He learns this via humiliation, which appears here as the precise opposite of the security inspired by attachment. Shibanath is the opposite of the attachment-reciprocating caregiver. Indeed, there is a sort of twisted sensitivity in Shibanath that allows him to teach Ashu his "proper" gender role. Shibanath is not impervious, like the postmaster. He is sensitive. But his sensitivity is without empathy. He knows just where Ashu is vulnerable and can be hurt. His humiliating story is his cruel parallel to the rationalizing ruminations of the postmaster and the liberating letter of the wife.

8.6 Conclusion

Again, Tagore undoubtedly had many narratives of understanding that organized his response to the world and guided his production of stories. Nonetheless, the attachment proto-story—with its contextual variations and countless potential instantiations—appears to have been particularly prominent. This is a complex narrative of understanding that shaped Tagore's production of many plot sequences along with their emotional engagements and ethical norms. It is a remarkable feature of Tagore's writing that the proto-story and its manifestations are so systematic and nuanced. Recognizing this systematic character and nuance undoubtedly has consequences for our understanding of a range of Tagore's works, and perhaps his actions as well. More importantly, it has consequences for our understanding of ourselves and of our own lives. The emotional and moral subtlety of Tagore's attachment proto-story goes well beyond those of the proto-stories that guide most of our lives. Perhaps reading and teaching Tagore's fiction will partially redefine the patterns of our feeling and cognition in the direction of his proto-story. Even a slight degree of such influence might have salutary effects, enhancing our own attachment sensitivity and broadening our own attachment openness.

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Chapter 9
Remembering Robi: Childhood, Freedom and Rabindranath Tagore

Satadru Sen

Abstract This essay explores Tagore's imagination of the child as a national subject through a consideration of his writings on childhood, authority and the free individual in colonial society, and memoirs of his own childhood. Rabindranath rejected, to a considerable extent, the authority of the father as it existed in contemporary *bhadralok* society. Simultaneously, he rejected the models of schooling and institutionalization, imported from Europe, that threatened native paternalism in some respects, but were aligned with it in others. He put forward, instead, a theory of child-rearing and education that emphasized a freedom that was restrained by a reformulation of nature and society and by love—including love of authority itself. The new Indian child that he imagined embraced the wildness of pedagogies that were identified with England, submitted to ideals (although not necessarily forms) of discipline that could be identified with India, and emerged as free: Indian but not orthodox, modern but not mimic, liberated and individual but also reassuringly social.

Keywords Childhood · Child subjectivity · Nationalism · Colonialism · Cultural psychobiography · Cultural politics

Rabindranath Tagore wore many hats over his long life. Not quite apart from being a writer, a composer and a painter, he was also a highly influential thinker about the education of children and about childhood itself in a particular moment in Indian history. That moment was marked by rebellion or rather by multiple crises of rebellion: Not only revolt against colonial rule, but also various simultaneous revolts against the very structures that were being held up by Indian nationalists as the antitheses of colonial alienation, such as religion, tradition, and the family. Rabindranath himself lived in the thick of these confrontations. Around the time of

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the first partition of Bengal (in 1905), he had chosen a side: He was more committed to the rebellion against conservative definitions of Indian tradition than to the revolt against British rule.[1] At this highly fertile point in his evolution, when he emerged as an educational pioneer and a critic of *swadeshi* extremism and British imperialism, Rabindranath consolidated his reputation as a peculiarly vexing rebel.

These were interconnected but seemingly contradictory developments. Nationalist agitation in *swadeshi*-era Bengal was also to some extent a youth movement energized by the participation of school and college students. It is counterintuitive that in this setting, an ideologue would be ambivalent about nationalism but enthusiastic about youthful self-assertion. Yet Rabindranath cultivated not only the voice of rebellion, but also that of youth. We see that in his typically articulate defense of nationalist student activists during the crisis in Presidency College that followed the assault on Edward Oaten in 1916 (Sen 2007). In that episode, Rabindranath occupied a position that came under attack from both the nationalist right and apologists for empire: He argued that youthful individualism, while highly desirable, was bound to be warped by the authoritarianism of the colonial regime and its educational apparatus. We see it also in his musical play *Tasher Desh* ("The Land of Cards," written in the early 1920s), a comic satire of youthful rebellion against an ossified and tradition-obsessed society, aimed openly at an audience of children but hardly irrelevant to its adult targets.

Not surprisingly, Rabindranath's reputation as the patron saint of rebel youth does not sit easily. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that it sits too easily. In either case, there is something unconvincing about it. His rebellion is far too genteel, too devoid of anger, violence, and profanity, to fit our expectations of the word. His major institution of rebellion—the school and "ashram" in Santiniketan—is, if anything, a bastion of bourgeois cultural orthodoxy within the modern Indian scheme of things. Bengalis like to joke about the neo-feudal mannerisms and Brahmo affectations of the culture of Santiniketan and are quite aware of the irony of its compulsive genuflection before a deified "Gurudeb" (Teacher-God, i.e., Rabindranath himself). A series of oppositions have sprung up around this divide: grittiness and jagged edges versus prettiness and decorum, Mrinal Sen and Ritwik Ghatak (in their different ways) versus Satyajit Ray, Calcutta University versus Visva-Bharati, the poetry of Jibanananda Das versus that of Rabindranath, and so on. These are not hard-and-fast oppositions and they do not hold up well to close inspection, but they reflect a tension surrounding Rabindranath's place in Bengali middle-class culture: The rebel is also, apparently, the establishment, and the gestures of rebellion are perpetually at risk of remaining a form of musical play.

I want to suggest in this essay that the conflict has an ideological coherence that can be found in Rabindranath's writings on childhood, authority and the

[1] The choice would become increasingly firm. 'What you call a patriot, that I am not,' he wrote in 1938 (*Char Adhyay*, 63).

free individual in colonial society, and in memoirs of his own childhood. Born in 1861, Rabindranath grew up in a period when—as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued—nationalist discourse tended to place the individual in a decidedly subordinate location within the patriarchal family that was also the normative Indian national domestic arrangement (Chakrabarty, 217–31). His interventions in the conventions of childhood, education, and the family necessarily had to contend with that authoritarian paternalism. Rabindranath rejected, to a considerable extent, the authority of the father as it existed in contemporary *bhadralok* society. Simultaneously, he rejected the models of schooling and institutionalization, imported from Europe, that threatened native paternalism in some respects, but were aligned with it in others. Most pertinently, he recoiled from the shadow of nihilism that was implicit in a world of youth in rebellion against father, teacher, and state and that appeared to consign the individual to insignificance and death. He put forward, instead, a theory of child-rearing and education that emphasized a freedom that was restrained by a reformulation of nature and society and by love—including love of authority itself.

This restrained, structured freedom was central to Rabindranath's vision of novelty in nationhood, i.e., his solution to the abiding problem of the colonial nationalist who seeks both to materialize something that is extant and ancient and to assert a radically new political and cultural reality. The new Indian child that he imagined—and that he imagined himself as having been—embraced the wildness of pedagogies that were identified with England, submitted to ideals (although not necessarily forms) of discipline that could be identified with India, and emerged as free: Indian but not orthodox, modern but not mimic, liberated and individual but also reassuringly social. Imbued with the fearlessness of innocence and also relatively plastic, children appeared singularly amenable to re-imagination, re-education, and re-socialization. In the case of adults, the corresponding maneuvers presented severe difficulties: The native adult was too hardened by adulthood, too invested in social and political relationships, to be easily reconfigured. Nevertheless, significant changes were already visible within Rabindranath's own family, which was neither "modern" nor recognizably "traditional." These shifts—or rather, destabilizations—made further change imaginable.

Robi, Rabindranath's narrated child, is not only merely an icon of the future, but also a gateway into the past and a bridge between the two. He is a way of imagining while remembering: Imagining what "we" were, what "we" are, and what "we" might be, while remaining a recognizable and continuous "we." The writer's recollections of his own youth in overlapping autobiographies—*Jibansmriti* and *Chhelebela*—are exercises in imagining different times and implicitly different places. The backwards gaze is, for instance, an evocation of technological simplicity: Childhood is a world with neither electricity nor gas, but sooty oil lamps. Its remembrance is thus a movement in civilizational time, an act of nostalgia, and simultaneously an evocation of obscurity (Tagore, *C* 10). Back then, Rabindranath writes ghosts and goblins lurked in the nooks and crannies of people's minds. The supernatural is thus located not only in the world of the child, but also in the world of a pre-rational, pre-modern time, effectively merging the

two worlds. Since then, he writes, "*bhitore baire alo bere gechhe*" ("there is an excess of light within and without"), and the ghosts have gone missing (11–2). The remembered child functions as the point at which relief and regret can both materialize, and where novelty must occupy the space vacated by the anachronistic.

I have chosen to focus in this essay on *Chhelebela* and *Jibansmriti* not because they paint an especially accurate portrait of the 1860s and 1870s. I chose them partly because they are probably Rabindranath's most commonly read prose and have played a vital role in ensuring that even at the age of a hundred and fifty, Robi remains—and continues to become—the prototype of the Bengali child: A dreamy, motherless boy wandering alone through the corridors of a mansion in decline, administering lessons in numbers and alphabets to railings and kittens. Rabindranath is himself, of course, a partial archetype of the adult bhadralok, and not just because he played a massively influential role in the creation of the archetype. The various narrated episodes of his life—prosaic, poetic, autobiographical, biographical, mythical, even cinematic—have become a national narrative of childhood, adulthood, loss, idealism, propriety, and inevitably, nostalgia. Within that narrative, *Chhelebela* and *Jibansmriti* have come to represent to middle-class Bengalis a distinct stage of their own lives (when they first read these books), just as the older Rabindranath's shattering poetry of grief might be read in—and represent—midlife and old age. In other words, because Bengalis tend to grow up and grow old with Rabindranath by reading his work in an "age-appropriate" sequence, those narratives and sequences appear natural. It is useful to remember, then, that the "Robi" stage of Rabindranath's life was assembled quite consciously as history and art, i.e., not as a natural and seamless "experience" but as a retrospective intervention in memory: midlife and old age circling back to inform childhood.

I chose them also because Rabindranath himself was highly conscious of the unreliability of autobiography-as-history, especially when the subject is one's own childhood, which then becomes a foreign country revisited by a partially sighted liar. He supplies in *Jibansmriti* an image that is both a memory and a metaphor: the ancient banyan tree (gone by the time of writing) in the garden (also vanished). Its overgrown canopy and roots *represent* (for the adult autobiographer) but also *are* (for the child of the past) an area of obscurity, fantasy, shelter, and the implied pre-colonial: a dark, mysterious complexity, Rabindranath called it (7).

Because the remembered child and childhood are to some extent fantasies of the adult looking backwards, the "reality" of fantasy and the representation of fantasy are not cleanly divided. There is instead a fluid, imaginative, and unreliable interplay between what the child experienced, what the adult remembers the child as having experienced, and what the adult would like the child to have experienced. Moreover, as Maja Zehfuss has pointed out, memory is not so much the recollection of a stable event, as a repeated and self-reinforcing practice: We remember not (only) an "original" event but (also) previous memories of that event, accumulating small and large deflections with each recollection (Zehfuss, 176). Such reconstruction, Rabindranath acknowledges, is often an aesthetic project (*JS* 1–2), and as such, it is subject to the politics of aesthetic choice. This allows us

to use the autobiographies to think about multiple periods and imaginations: Not only that of imaginative young Robi, but also that of imagined Robi reconceived by Rabindranath, and indeed, the Robi of the later generations that have adopted him as an icon of childhood and history. Even in the autobiographies, authorship overflows Rabindranath constantly, and this happens especially when he makes a particular effort to recover the child's voice. In *Chhelebela*, the later and more self-consciously "juvenile" of the two autobiographies, the author falls back every so often on specific stories that he had *heard* in his childhood and that—like the boatman Abdul's tale of the wolf, for instance—indicate a deeper, pre-rational past that is peculiarly accessible to children. These stories are known to practically all middle-class Bengalis, who learn them as children and then recall them as adults as a ritual of remembering their own childhoods. In the process, Robi breaks up into fragments embedded in layers not only of individual pasts, but also a shared cultural hinterland that constitutes both a foundation of, and a refuge from, the present.

That hinterland is undeniably colonial–historical: Abdul wishes his gun license had not expired, as, no doubt, did other natives affected by the Arms Act. But it is a colonial-historical world full of traces of something old and obsolete, which represent, paradoxically, a world of children. Rabindranath suggested a vivid analogy that demonstrates the paradox: The past is the prince, occasionally and seasonally distributing his wealth, whereas the present is the son of a merchant, always open for business and open to all (*C* 28). Using a trope of Bengali folklore (which was then being collected and codified), Rabindranath was able to make a distinction between early-capitalist colonial society and the final decades of colonialism and to indicate that both might be glimpsed in the present if childhood is utilized as a prism and a portal. But through the same strategy, he also ensured that the past is enveloped in loss and nostalgia, loaded with things that will not come back: foods, spaces, forms of transportation, princes and merchants who go off into the wilderness, and what might be called lifestyles, including styles of being a child and remembering childhood (*C* 21).

While modern childhood, saturated with diaries and photographs, is built on nostalgia, the overwhelming sense of loss emanating from Rabindranath's boyhood is most typical of the migrant memory. Rabindranath was not a migrant in a conventional sense, but he was nevertheless implicated in a double migration. One was a movement beyond childhood. Another was a peculiarly colonial movement: beyond the presumed pre-colonial, beyond the native, and beyond the pre-modern. Born soon after the Mutiny and writing at the dawn of the age of strategic bombing, Rabindranath was well positioned to perceive a great deal of such epochal "migration," but the perception is also inherent in the colonized experience. For the Bengali reader in independent India, there is an additional layer of migration-and-loss, produced by stories that invoke east Bengal, the Padma river, and so on. For those born after 1947, this lost land/river/time is entirely mythical. Much-imagined in shifting contexts, the child Robi is thus an extremely rich historical text, capable of transporting modern adults backwards even as they remain highly conscious of (and thus anchored to) their present location in time and place.

Rabindranath underlined two great sets of social distances in Robi's world: between males and females, and between children and adults (*C* 25). These divisions are not quite separate and frequently merge, since children of both sexes are partially absorbed into the female society of mothers and great-aunts, with their indifference to clocks, their folktales and folk-music, and their rituals of pre-capitalist paan-making (*C* 33, 41–3). Boyhood is not gendered in a consistently modern masculine way; the "house arrest" perspective of *Chhelebela* is, in fact, strikingly similar to Rabindranath's sense of the locked-inside world of women, in which the outside is perceptible only as echoes and reflections (*C* 39, *JS* 8–12). (The magnificent opening minutes of Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* come to mind). Rabindranath does not describe this as entirely a bad thing, since it incites the child to produce fantastic/mythical spaces within the quotidian/familiar: One's own home becomes a fairytale, the urban back garden becomes a wilderness, and a heap of rocks becomes a mountain. But it also produces childhood as a fundamentally lonely experience, in which loneliness is a modern dysfunction, i.e., the consequence of relatively recent changes in familial roles and adult expectations.

Even before the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Rabindranath's childhood was already in a crisis of gender and family. It was lived, for instance, within an unfolding shift in elite-Indian maternity that required the child and the autobiographer to improvise their responses. Robi is more alienated from the world of women than he is connected—Rabindranath repeatedly emphasized that he was raised by male servants—and a large part of the Bengali iconography of Robi is that of a practically orphaned child. (The intimacy between children and servants can also be read against the grain to highlight the distance between the child and the upper-class man). His mother Sarada Debi is a remarkably sparse presence in his memories of early childhood. Rabindranath was 13 years old when Sarada Debi died, so the "motherless child" narrative is not straightforwardly accurate. He tells us that she was an invalid in the final stages of her life, but more than that she appears in his memoirs in a pre-nuclear mode of disengaged maternity that, in the later nineteenth century, no longer fit easily into upper-class families infiltrated and destabilized (but hardly transformed) by modern Victorian ideals of marriage and parenting. By 1912, when *Jibansmriti* was published, the discomfort would have been even more palpable. Robi's mother is often affectionate, but she is far from the model of maternity that we see in *Gora* (1910), in which Anandamoyi might be regarded as Rabindranath's attempt to reconcile an adoring, attentive "Indian mother" with a more recognizably European-derived maternity (*JS* 58). Nor is Sarada Debi the playful, intimate mother that we find in the *Shishu* poems (1913), who is frequently addressed by the child in the ultra-familiar "tui" form—not "apni" or even "tumi"—and suggests a rustic Romantic familiality that has been invented and immediately consigned to nostalgia and longing.

The Romantic also informs the male adults available to the child's imagination. Brave, chivalrous but frightening dacoits—who are already stories by Robi's time and are further fictionalized in Rabindranath's writing—represent a source of masculinity for Bengali boys in a time when the specter of effeminacy haunted the nationalist psyche, and the wrestling craze was beginning to catch on as a

middle-class phenomenon (Sinha, 1–32). But they also represent, in the colonial world, an alternative legality and legitimacy: a romantic residue that is deeply rooted in the very idea of an alternative, i.e., of rebellion. The child discovers dacoits in the imagined wildernesses of the past, but also identifies with them in the present: They are both an Other and a Self (*C* 29–31). This duality is a definitive luxury of childhood, inaccessible—or at any rate, impermissible—to adults without the cooperation of children, real or imagined. Even as the child is given a Romantic imagination that differentiates him from adults, he also functions as a screen on which adults can project their Romantic and rebellious inclinations.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that although Rabindranath announces the existence of a sharp divide between the worlds of children and adults in his boyhood, the child–adult dichotomy is not safe from slippage. "In those days, the young *and* the old were children," he writes (*C* 49, emphasis mine). The desire to see the past as an escape from the disciplined boundaries of modernity, including the boundary between adulthood and childhood, is too powerful to escape consistently. The slippage is particularly relevant for authors setting out to write for children. Rabindranath noted that in the literature available to him in his childhood, there was no ready differentiation between children's books and adults' books (*JS* 62). He saw early Bengali "youth fiction"—literature by young authors for young readers—as a new genre without a pre-existing code of discipline. That code had to be improvised by the author, and while the requirement opened up a kind of freedom, it was a modern, adult freedom that required contours and management (*JS* 84).

That perception is particularly evident in Rabindranath's thinking on adolescence. He described the age between the middle teens and early twenties as culturally under defined: A bewildering zone that individuals had to negotiate without significant external guidance, like primitive animals in what was neither land nor sea (*JS* 99). He was, of course, writing at a time when the concept of adolescence was very much in its infancy in the social sciences. But he was also writing from a colonial world in which it was not entirely clear whether natives had an adolescence at all, and in which it was also clear that such a lack, if confirmed, could represent a racial failure. For Rabindranath, writing from a "future" in which adolescence existed as a problem, the apparent non-acknowledgment of that problem in his past made his own youth appear disconnected from the certainties of modernity. It was, again, a freedom in need of fixing.

Moreover, for Rabindranath, the core of adolescence was exuberance: an excess of impulse, an overflow of messy (and internal) emotions into orderly (and external) social spaces. This exuberance signified freedom, but it was not unambiguously welcomed: It was identified also with a loss of self-control. He saw his own adolescence as a stage of life that was marked by outbursts of natural freedom, that was responsive to freedom, and that was nurtured by freedom of the kind he was given by his father Debendranath and brother Jyotirindranath. This included, especially, the freedom to make mistakes. Rabindranath writes that "badness" in the adolescent is preferable to zealous attempts on the part of parents, teachers, and the government ("the religious, social and political police") to ensure

goodness. Compelling youth to be good produces an intolerably oppressive slavery (*JS* 71, 83, 85). This is, of course, a comment not only on child-rearing, but also on colonialism. In the context of colonial society, then, childhood becomes a problem of freedom. It represents freedom, it incites freedom, but since there is no going back to being a child any more than there is a going back to pre-colonial times, it also incites the need to imagine freedoms that are consistent with modernity and racial–civilizational self-assertion.

9.1 Prison-Houses of Modernity

The difficulty of reconciling freedom and modernity pervades Rabindranath's thinking on the most inescapable aspect of modern childhood, which is schooling. It is, of course, well known that Robi did not enjoy going to school; the aversion is central to Rabindranath's image as a rebel, and his experiments with pedagogy in Santiniketan were transparently a response to that early trauma. It is worth noting, nevertheless, that when writing about his childhood, Rabindranath made explicit connections between the school and the other "total institutions" of modern society, pointing out their shared penal qualities. In the autobiographies, school is described not only as hell, but also as a prison in which the child—and the child's time—is swallowed by hacks, clocks, and calendars. Academic study is usually described as drudgework, a mill grinding away at the spirit (*C* 31). At one point in *Chhelebela*, Rabindranath refers to his school as a "ten-to-four Andaman Islands" (penal colony) in a way that Foucault would have approved (*C* 40). Even at home, Robi is subject to a crushing routine of tutoring. Rabindranath saw modern pedagogy as a mechanism of making an external knowledge internal to the child, but was straightforwardly dubious about whether a system that is literally punishing could be an effective method of achieving this (*JS* 4). Thus, he both saw the Foucauldian dynamic in the modern institution and doubted whether it "works."

The doubt might be seen in the context of the colonial discourse of the "native crammer," i.e., the idea (commonly expressed by disdainful Anglo-Indians) that Indian students merely "crammed" for examinations without actually learning anything and became damaged, demoralized, and dangerous in the process (Sen, SIH 23:2). Rabindranath did not reject the basic accusation, but sought an explanation in something other than racial–cultural inferiority. In the drab, monotonous classroom, he wrote, like in any other institutional ward or cell, the likes and dislikes of the individual become irrelevant, beauty is banished, contact with the real world is lost, and learning is enmeshed in cruelty and horror ("*nirmam bibhishika*"). He saw the classroom both as an extension of modern-colonial reality of jails, hospitals, and factories and also as an exile from reality, which corresponded here with the nature of the child. Cutoff from that reality, the denatured child-inmate was inevitably driven to fantasizing about rebellion, which Rabindranath wryly characterized as the richly colonial notion of "sedition" (*JS* 18, 26, 34, 60). Fantasy/imagination—in other words, the basic stuff of aesthetics, culture, writing, and being—itself became an act of sedition and escape.

But where could the refugee from Macaulay escape? The child Rabindranath was still in touch with an earlier intellectual tradition, marked by Farsi education and what appears in his hindsight (in the person of Srikantha-babu, a family friend of the Tagores) to be an attractive unworldliness, agelessness, and abdication of adulthood (*JS* 29–30). Robi is not equipped or encouraged to explore that vanishing world. His teachers, surrendering to his aversion to the standard school curriculum, assign him alternative readings (*C* 72–3). But the alternatives—Kalidas, Shakespeare, etc.—are an alternative canon or rather a shuffling and expansion of the standard syllabus. "Independent study," then as now, was not especially independent. Robi prefers studying informally with his father to studying with schoolteachers and tutors, but that is merely a long holiday in the mountains (*JS* 51).

That leaves the disused old palanquin from Rabindranath's grandmother's time, in which Robi shuts himself for long flights (or rather, voyages) of fantasy. Inside the palanquin, Rabindranath wrote, the clock time of the outside world did not apply. The palanquin goes where Robi wills it to go (*C* 13–4). But even this famous palanquin (a central prop of "Birpurush," which is probably Rabindranath's best-known poem for children, set in the still-real wilderness around Bolpur, which merges with the folkloric emptiness of Tepantar) is not untouched by colonialism: As often as not, Robi borrows its destinations from Macaulay's curriculum. A cultural hijacker, he imagines the palanquin as Robinson Crusoe's island, and himself as Crusoe. Here, we glimpse again the layered nature of the past: A writer from "our" past is looking back (in 1940, when *Chhelebela* was published) eight decades into his own past, which contains a relic from an even deeper past in the shape and the space of the old pre-Mutiny palanquin. Each layer contains possibilities of escape and fantasy, which are tied to assertions of the will and movement across boundaries. By going *into* the dark past of the palanquin, he goes *out* to a wider world, which is already hybrid: It is marked both by recovered pre-colonial myths and by the colonial mythology of Robinson Crusoe, with the native as Crusoe rather than as Friday. Even within the palanquin, freedom is stubbornly attached to the modern self, provided that self can be dislocated from the prison-house of institutional convention, and the institution reimagined: as a palanquin in childhood or as a school with open-air "classrooms" improvising a "global" education in the Bengali language.

The emphasis on a mother tongue, which marks Rabindranath's autobiographies as well as his pedagogical work in Santiniketan, is perhaps a natural corollary of the remaking of childhood by a man who had once been tormented simultaneously by Macaulay and motherlessness. But Rabindranath's ambivalence about learning and studying in English is actually the basis of a complex philosophy of pedagogy and culture in a colonial society. On the one hand, he saw English as an unnecessary burden on the native child (*JS* 22). On the other hand, he saw English literature as a highly desirable conveyor of excitement and agitation, not only in a culture that was overly inert and given to restraint, but also in the nature of the child that stood to remain restrained and underdeveloped. English stirs things up in sluggish pools, he wrote, and this is good even if it stirs up the mud of the bottom and produces rebellion and disobedience (*JS* 100–4).

Rabindranath made a distinction within European literature. Classical European literature is refined, with established codes of discipline comparable to those found within Indian cultural forms, he wrote in *Jibansmriti*. But English literature—the core of the Macaulayan curriculum—was new, crude, and unrestrained. It was thus doubly alien in the Indian setting. This alien culture was easy to consume superficially, without serious interest in its truths, but such consumption produced only the superficial and cruel rebellion of mimics. (He distinguished carefully between rebellion based on excitement and rebellion based on truth-seeking.) This superficiality and cruelty, he suggested, lay at the heart of the problem of colonial culture. But English literature in the colony could also be disciplined, subjected to codes of restraint, which could be developed at least partly from an Indian cultural repertoire (*JS* 100–4). Thus, the rounding out of jagged edges—restrained excitement, codified rebellion, and indigenized English influence—became central to Rabindranath's philosophy of truth and to his pedagogy, and it was focused on the child because he saw the malleable, as-yet-unsettled, colonial child as the primary object of risk and benefit.

We have therefore a pronounced dialectic, in which overcivilized inertia meets brash, savage excitement and is resolved in disciplined, restrained rebellion. The dialectic was not Rabindranath's invention: It can be identified in Bankim and to some extent in the Brahmo Samaj also. But Rabindranath was original in placing it at the center of a project of rethinking childhood in heroic terms and simultaneously revising adult authority by making it less intrusive and more accommodating. Youth and excitement added up to a fearlessness, a willingness to try new things, that for Rabindranath was both productive in the cultural sense and essential to freedom. He saw Jyotirindranath, in particular, as having fostered this freedom in him, and it is fair to say that his older brother, whose own independence and daring were evidently matched by his readiness to encourage those traits in Robi, and whose dignified superiority in the family hierarchy was leavened by intimacy and indulgence, comes closest to an ideal father figure in Rabindranath's memoirs (*JS* 109–10). But youth and excitement also generated a fear, which is evident, for instance, in Rabindranath's attitude toward contemporary English music. For him, its "extreme" lack of restraint was not only an aesthetic failure, it verged—paradoxical enough—on the unnatural (*JS* 105–6). Effectively rejecting Nietzsche as well as *Sturm und Drang*, Rabindranath hesitated to equate nature with unrestrained freedom. Instead, he took a position in which improvising and imposing a code of discipline produced the natural by producing its boundaries and its aesthetics; it also saved rebellion, iconoclasm, and freedom from an otherwise inevitable nihilism. Taming wildness without killing it, and achieving ownership over the process of restraint, became the critical maneuvers in the realization of freedom in nature and also of the nature of freedom (*JS* 111, 131).

That dialectic of freedom is enabled by love, including erotic love. There can be little doubt that Rabindranath's views on youthful exuberance developed not only with reference to the political violence around him, but also as a slowly building reaction to the suicide of his sister-in-law Kadambari Debi when he was twenty four. The relationship between Rabindranath and Kadambari Debi is,

in some ways, an open obscurity: widely imagined as slightly scandalous, but not clearly evidenced and hence not openly discussed, except obliquely in Rabindranath's own writing (and Satyajit Ray's cinematic adaptations). It is worth noting that in *Nashta Nir* and *Ghare Baire*, and again in *Char Adhyay*, the erotic excess of youth goes hand in hand with its political exhilaration: Rabindranath will not disavow this dual heroism, and insists that it is inseparable from social and political justice. But the most searing chapter of *Jibansmriti* deals with Kadambari's death. He does not name her, does not directly implicate himself (except by the striking refusal to name names or go into details, in a book that otherwise overflows with names and details), but the devastation is unmistakable (*JS* 142–6). Liberated and also condemned by youthful excitement, Rabindranath sought solace from a discovery of its limits:

> Tobu ei duhshaho duhkher bhitor diye amar moner modhye kshane-kshane ekta akashmik anander hawa bahite lagilo, tahate ami nijei ashcharja hoitam. Jiban je akebare abichalito nishchita nahe, ei duhkher shangbadei moner bhar laghu hoiya gelo. Jahake dhoriachhilam tahake chharitei hoilo, eitake kshotir dik dia dekhia jemon bedona pailam temoni shei-kshanei ihake muktir dik dia dekhia ekta udar shanti bodh korilam.
>
> ["But through that unbearable pain sometimes blew a sudden breeze of joy, surprising me. The discovery of the uncertainty of life lifted some of the weight off my heart. To have to let go of what I had held was painful, but when I viewed it from the perspective of freedom, it gave me a kind of peace." (*JS* 144-5)]

This was not, it should be emphasized, a simple escape into detachment: It was a passage through detachment, not only to the restraint (not repudiation) of excesses of aesthetic appreciation and love, but also to the ability to survive the consequences of excess. Writing about the relationship of the individual to the world (nature as well as society), Rabindranath suggested that there is, ideally, a movement from the wild freedom of emptiness and detachment, through the constraint of being burdened by the world, to freedom-in-discipline and responsibility born of love. "*Bairagya-sadhane mukti she amar noi*," he wrote: "Mine is not the freedom of cultivating detachment" (*JS* 132–3). The Brahmo roots of this emphasis on restrained engagement—with a brilliant sister-in-law or with contemporary Europe—are never in doubt, but it should be noted that Rabindranath is not limited by the Brahmo model and constantly reaches across the aisle to the turbulence evident in the Hindu mainstream. Again, *Gora* is probably the best example. The accomplishment of rebellion and freedom is identified with a rearrangement of memory and love, i.e., with establishing and managing "true" connections between adulthood and childhood.

9.2 Authority and the Loving Rebel

The loving rebel is a conundrum of authority. The problem is inescapable in a colonial society in which native subjects and sons are expected to love king–emperors and domestic despots, and where childhood, not being a permanent condition except in racist discourse, does not automatically provide a lasting solution.

Moreover, Rabindranath's own nostalgia for a Romantic childhood identifiable with the past can be sharply at odds with his construction of modernity, or rather newness, as an admirable willingness on the part of children to question (although not necessarily defy) adults. Here too there are vexing complications, expressed as nostalgia: Such new children were apparently hard to find in the Santiniketan of his adulthood, unlike in his childhood, when he himself was such a child (*C* 51). Thus, even as newness is embraced, the present and its children are not: A stubborn gap remains between the ideal and the reality, especially when the reality is British India. There is, nevertheless, a strongly asserted determination to revise the authority of kings, fathers, and teachers, i.e., the structure of the nationalist-conservative family, not to mention the empire. New children called for new adults.

What might these adults be like? Convinced that coercion was counterproductive in education, Rabindranath sought to make a clear distinction between authority and authoritarianism, even as he acknowledged the difficulty of the distinction (*JS* 31). He was aided, once again, by a rethinking of nature. He saw the nature of the child as having a primeval authority of its own, against which adults must struggle, but which they also had to respect (*JS* 40). In his autobiographical narrative, his conception of that respect is articulated in terms of space: in some ways, a juvenile version of Virginia Woolf's "room of her own," and a fairly radical idea in the context of the Indian family in Rabindranath's lifetime.

His autobiographies indicate that the child's own space could surface in unexpected areas, some of which were accidental products of shifts within the family. He vividly describes being under the authority of servants, being beaten by them, and so on (*JS* 13–4). He resents it, rebels against it, recognizes (as an adult) the absurdity and irony of "sedition" against a regime of servants, and sees it as an arrangement that represses both the servant and the child. But he also sees the servant-regime as a source of freedom, because unlike the authority of parents, it is incomplete, indifferent, and therefore not stifling (*JS* 5–6). It leaves him ambivalent about the intimacy of the nuclear family. Servants-as-surrogate-parents are careless, violent, and pre-modern, but since their authority is sporadic and makeshift, deployed by default rather than any encompassing design, they allow the child the necessary room to imagine and inhabit his own world.

An accidental benefit cannot be a prescription; however, Rabindranath was interested in prescribing something more reliable than negligence. For that, new models of parenting were required. I have already touched upon his tinkering with motherhood, but the problem of remaking the father was, for a son in that setting, more directly relevant to questions of authority and rebellion. Debendranath Tagore was no more a "hands-on" parent than was his wife, and he was more often away than he was present. Even when he came home to the Jorasanko mansion, he came almost as a visitor, except that the entire household would suddenly enter the hushed, reverent mode of a Brahmo prayer hall. To Robi as well as Rabindranath, he is quite literally "Pitrideb" (Father-God). In other words, his authority, while awesome and real, is also distant in its godlike quality (*JS* 38). He is different from the ever-present, ubiquitous, meddlesome tyrant of middle-class patriarchy.

Debendranath represented a model of paternal authority based on a significant modification of the *bhakti* that Chakrabarty has emphasized in his analysis of colonial Bengal (Chakrabarty, 217–31). The *bhakti*, or existential devotion, to which Chakrabarty alludes is inseparable from total surrender to an arbitrary and overwhelming authority usually associated with the divine.[2] Debendranath and Rabindranath appear, however, to have improvised a separation, in which the authority of the "Father-God" remained awesome but also became contextual, thus allowing the son the "breathing space" of individuality. The value of this model in the modern world is explicit in Rabindranath's formulation of the institutional ideals of Santiniketan in a series of essays written between 1909 and 1916. In that narrative, freedom and joy—the missing elements in the conventional relationship between the child and the father/teacher—were restored to the child's response to authority, not least by placing "Gurudeb" at a benign distance from the student (RT, *Santiniketan*, 15–7). Also, by characterizing the school as an *ashram*, Rabindranath did not just make a nostalgic gesture toward a classical or Vedic past, he also produced a specific form of "refuge" *in* and *from* the modern world: a new child's space as well as a new adult space, where rebellion could be constructed as (and contained by) good taste and decorous forms, decorum and good taste invested with the rhetoric of rebellion, and anti-colonial individuality saved from its own excesses. This institution/space was liberating because it generated dislocations and distance: not only from Utilitarian ugliness, colonial oppressions, and pistol-packing nationalists, but also from fathers of the mundane sort.[3]

Distance and awe could thus be reconciled with the child's desire for intimacy and made to produce individuality. Robi's relationship to his father is related to his sense of himself as a housebound child: with Debendranath immersed in the exotic and remote, the domestic location and force of paternal authority become diluted. Father, like God and the abroad, becomes impressive because he is distant and exotic, but he simultaneously makes room for the son at home (*JS* 38–9). Robi breaks into his father's room when Debendranath is away and hides out in this secret, forbidden world, much as he hides out in the palanquin (*JS* 9). While this activity can certainly be read in Freudian terms, and Rabindranath's writings on childhood can be richly Freudian (I am thinking again of "Birpurush," but his relationship with Kabambari Debi is not safe from Freud either), it is also useful to note that Robi's invasion of his father's space is not so much a direct challenge to paternal authority as a surreptitious usurpation. At no point does the question of confrontation arise; it is simply bypassed.

A different, more revealing intimacy emerges when Debendranath takes Robi along with him to the Himalayas. Although Debendranath is strictly controlling in some areas of his son's life, he is permissive in others and inclined to encourage

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[2] On *bhakti* as a cultural phenomenon, see Ramanujan (1973).

[3] In this respect, Santiniketan was within the existing trajectory of the colonial-Indian boarding school, which was based on a dissatisfaction with native domesticity. Sen, *Colonial Childhoods*, Chap. 5.

independence and initiative. This is not only different from the predictable model of an intrusive, stifling paternal authority (and informed by emergent European norms), it also divides the life of the child into more or less clearly demarcated zones of obedience and independence: one in which childhood persists and another in which adulthood emerges (*JS* 44, 53–4). Such parenting undergirded, for Rabindranath, a notion of truth that could emerge and survive only in the absence of coercion. Its connections to the imperative of responding to the paternalism of the colonial regime—itself a producer, patron, and disseminator of "truths"—are very real and complex, intersecting as they do with Rabindranath's ideas about freedom and love. His account of running away in real terror from an imaginary policeman (*JS* 4–5) can be read as a metaphor of the colonial child's reaction to an authority that is adult, alien and incarcerating. But when Debendranath gives Robi 500 rupees as a reward for the Bengali songs he had written and tells him that since the king is a foreigner and cannot appreciate native poets, he must step in, Rabindranath effectively suggests a paternal authority that is simultaneously intimate, appreciative of the individuality of the son, and a patron of national culture (*JS* 50). This is not the nationhood of the revolutionary terrorists, but it is nevertheless a nationhood of sorts, identifiable with the final stage of the dialectic of freedom, compatible with rebellion as well as love, and constituted by reformulated sons and fathers.

The revision of paternalism is predicated on a notion of childhood innocence that is inherently unstable and that requires the father/state to be accommodating rather than rigid. Rabindranath describes his own participation in a nationalist secret society in the 1870s as a kind of child's play (*JS* 78–9). The narrative is ironically reminiscent of "playing detectives" in British children's literature. This is consistent with the wider tendency of Indian nationalists in the early twentieth century to look back at the 1970s as a time of innocence, when rebellion was not incompatible with love. I want to reproduce, at this point, an essay that Rabindranath wrote during the Presidency College crisis of 1916. The piece appeared in *Sabuj Patra*, a journal recognized as a forum for radical social criticism. At a moment when large sections of Anglo-Indian and Indian-conservative opinion were nearly hysterical about the "anarchic" tendencies of Bengali schoolboys and college students, Rabindranath wrote:

> The incident (i.e., the assault on Edward Oaten) is only an outward expression of the spirit of rebellion which has been bred in the minds of Bengali students by the haughtiness and aggressive egotism of English professors and by the sense of injustice done to Indian professors. Situated as all Englishmen are in India, an English professor of a college in Bengal looks upon his Bengali student not merely as a student but also as a subject. Consequently, it becomes natural for him to lose patience for even a slight cause. He considers it his duty not only to train up Bengali youths but also to maintain the prestige of the British Raj. Besides this, he is in the habit of wounding the social and religious susceptibilities of his Indian students. Of course, it is difficult for an English professor in India to forget that he belongs to the ruling race and that his students belong to the subject race, but it is equally natural for his Indian students to resent this treatment and sometimes give outward expression to this feeling of resentment. English rule and English education have, for more than a 100 years, been creating in the minds of the Indians a sense of

> self-respecting individuality which it will now be hard to destroy and the destruction of which will mean the unfulfillment of England's mission in India. The history of India has always been in a nebulous condition consisting, as it does, of the history of different races not welded together into a homogenous whole. It is only since the advent of Englishmen, whom we must henceforward recognize as one of the races permanently inhabiting India, and the establishment of English rule in the country that it has begun to take a definite shape. It is England's sacred task to fashion the history of India and she must not shrink from it. It is God's decree that she is required to perform. If she performs it willingly it will a pleasant and ennobling task. If she performs it unwillingly it will be an unpleasant and tormenting burden. It therefore behooves all English professors in India to build up the character of their Indian students into one of love for Englishmen. And this can only be done by subjecting them to a rule of love and not to a hard and heartless rule. The name Bengali has now-a- days become an object of abhorrence to Englishmen. This feeling towards Bengalis must be given up and a feeling of love and sympathy must be substituted in its place. If this is done, Bengali students will, on leaving the University, carry into the world a love and respect for Englishmen which will have a most far-reaching and beneficial effect on the administration and well-being of the country. If this is not done the minds of Bengalis will become embittered against Englishmen even from their college days and the relations between them and their rulers will become more and more strained. (*Sabuj Patra*, Chaitra 1322)

The radicalism of this remarkable polemic is not straightforward. Rabindranath recognizes the fractured roles of the native student and the white teacher in the colonial classroom and grounds the anger of the Indian student in an individuality that is necessarily hostile to the state (Bose, 5), but he disavows neither the individual nor the cultural–political ideologies that produced him. His growing distaste for nationalism was based, after all, at least partly on a sharp awareness of its crushing effect on individuality.[4] But he feels compelled to point out that the fostering of individuality in native youth goes against the grain of colonial administrative *practice*, which is not separable from pedagogy. Thus, the adulthood that is associated with the colonial school must simultaneously produce and repress the native individual, the pleasure of production turning immediately into the burden of repression: a burden that can be ameliorated only by love, which is possible in the reimagined family/ashram/nation but a mirage in the racist state. By differentiating between "rule of love" and "heartless rule", Rabindranath again articulated his reimagined relationship between the generations (and implicitly, genders) and posed it in opposition to the coercion of colonialism.

In 1916, i.e., before the advent of Gandhi but at the tail end of the first wave of *swadeshi* agitation, it was reasonable for Rabindranath to see the British presence in India as a permanent fact of life that could be modified but not eliminated. The modification he suggests is double-edged, marked by an essentially pessimistic but nevertheless productive struggle to locate childhood in the colony. He wants the colonizer to be a better father by acknowledging the transitional nature

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[4] 'The place you've assigned me, calling it a country—which… is nothing but a country of your band's own make—(is) nothing but a cage to me. My natural powers do not find full scope in it; they are becoming unhealthy and perverted. My wings have been clipped, my limbs shackled.' RT, *Char Adhyay*, 38.

of childhood irrespective of race, indulging the rebellious instincts of the young individual, and respecting his emergent adulthood. It is, typically, a rebellion marked by restraint—and by nostalgia. While colonial schooling and disciplining distorted the nature of the child by repressing the impulse toward political heroism, Rabindranath wrote in *Jibansmriti*, the regime "back then" was more often inclined to ignore the sedition of children, which prevented a greater and more violently tragic distortion (*JS* 79). Things are different now, he implied, observing that even when children are slow to learn the content of the lesson, they quickly learn the manner in which the lesson is taught and that any project of teaching liberalism through illiberal methods was bound to be a violent failure.

9.3 Some Implications

One of the shibboleths about "Indian culture," "Asian culture," and similar essentially Orientalist/nationalist constructions is that "we" are "family-oriented" that intergenerational relationships are grounded in authority and obedience, not rebellion or individual self-assertion. That is, naturally, a comparative assessment, in the sense that it contains an implicit comparison with the supposedly lesser "family-orientation" and greater individualism of Europe. The construction, in many variants, has been used historically to suggest a fundamental difference between East and West, and for nationalists in the colonial world, that difference has generally been interpreted positively. It is worth remembering, therefore, that this particular snippet of colonial difference, like others, is rooted in the ambivalence and insecurity of a native elite confronted with loss, loneliness, and nostalgia on the one hand, and multiple oppressions on the other. The idea that the child is an individual entitled to the privileges of liberal individualism promised to alleviate the oppressions, but the individualizing processes were themselves oppressive and tended to accentuate the loss and the loneliness.

Rabindranath's writings about childhood—his own and those of others—indicate an acute sensitivity to these dilemmas and a series of interventions that were, on the whole, highly influential. Given his centrality in Bengali (and to a lesser degree, Indian) bourgeois culture, it could hardly be otherwise. By looking at Rabindranath (and at Robi), we can see the contorted but also aesthetically rewarding movements by which individualism, rebellion, and a discourse of freedom were injected into the notion of a modern, natural, distinct, Bengali/Indian childhood, alongside strategies of containment. Containment, as much as rebellion, became central to being simultaneously juvenile and free. Going by Elias and Foucault, not to mention Freud, the dynamic of containment is ubiquitous in the history of modern childhood. [Foucault, of course, also highlighted the element of emancipation, but he meant primarily the emancipation of discourse (Foucault, 17)]. In the colonial environment, however, there has been a real preoccupation with the freedom of the child itself and with the emancipation of the various entities that children might represent: nation, race, the past, and the future.

Colonial society, more than metropolitan Europe, has needed the rebel child not just to be free, but also simply to be self-identifiable. The challenge has been to accomplish this emancipation without lapsing into atoms or anarchy, i.e., without bringing down the authoritative structures that the decolonized collective stands to inherit. Rabindranath's solution was to formalize and limit rebellion within a contextualized and thus limited authority. He did not, of course, "accomplish" that feat of accommodation in some decisive, triumphant way. Such challenges define Indian National Society and as such are beyond triumphant resolution. Rather, he materialized—in literature, in the home and at school—the aesthetic and political possibilities of a cultural tension, in which decolonized modernity could reside in the exploitation of its own inconsistencies like a brown Crusoe in a palanquin.

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Chapter 10
The Educational Efforts of Rabindranath Tagore

Nita Kumar

Abstract In this paper, the author looks at Rabindranath Tagore as an educator. A poet, and not strictly a nationalist, Tagore was an outstanding humanist and used his imagination and his own personal experience to feed into his educational venture. The essay initiates a hermeneutic study of his writings, as well as a discursive comparison of his ideas with those of modernity and educators located in modern contexts, such as those of Europe and America, attempting to decode the implications of Tagore's many educational choices, such as of buildings, curricula, teachers' training, and rituals in his school. The author's conclusion highlights the possibilities and failures of Tagore's educational philosophy and practice, leading to further insights into a definition of success and what is needed for an educational venture in modern India to succeed in progressive terms.

Keywords Childhood · Education · Pedagogy · Nationalism · Creativity · Modernity

To understand the nature of Rabindranath Tagore's educational efforts, I will adopt two historical perspectives. The first is of plural intellectual formation and is located in the 1860s–1890s, when Rabindranath was in his childhood and teens, and then became intimate with the Bengal countryside. The second perspective is of the technology of education, and I locate it from 1901 to the 1920s, when Rabindranath started his own school and strove to make it established, and when he started his university. In the first perspective, he is one of the educated elites of

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India and to be judged as such, and in the second, he is a leading actor in the great drama of education in modern India, and to be judged by the performance of his school. I will refer to the university occasionally but, for reasons of space, focus on the school.

10.1 Rabindranath's Educational Formation

The educated classes of India in the nineteenth century were the products of a plural education. One education consisted of their studies in English and Western disciplines and took place in a colonial or missionary school. The other education consisted of their "studies," not thus recognized, in their infancy with parents and surrogate parents; their learning of Indian languages; their mastering of indigenous narratives, epistemologies, and practices. All the new educated Indians were thus the products of a dual education and lived in two worlds, of which they necessarily tried to make a synthesis in different ways. In a simpler way, let us say that we can narrate the formation of any nineteenth century Indian intellectual and leader by the following criteria: caste, class, family, formal education, languages, region, and religion. On these axes, then, what can we say about the educational formation of Rabindranath?

Though the Tagores were Brahmans, they were not Puritans, being historically stricken from the higher echelons of Brahminhood. They could more easily venture into commerce, as Rabindranath's grandfather, Dwarkanath (1794–1846), had done. He was an impressive merchant-prince, with indigo and saltpeter factories, coal mines, sugar, tea and agricultural estates, cargo fleets, and a bank. Making him a "prince" were his lavish habits and patronage of every educational and intellectual venture of his time. Or they could venture into reform, as his father, Debendranath (1817–1905), known as Maharshi, or great sage, had done with Brahmoism, all the time building the family fortunes further and maintaining the synthesis between the worldly and the spiritual. Or they could be pioneers in the arts, as his brother, Jyotirindranath, and his nephews, Gaganendranath, and Abanindranath were. They did not feel a burden to either continue, or explain why they were discontinuing, rituals and *samskaras*, social routines or conventional career paths. The particular history of Rabindranath's family points to the processes of synthesis and the change that characterizes the history of India and explains his own choices.

Rabindranath, as we know, came from a huge family and was the youngest of fourteen siblings. He writes little about his mother, Sarada Devi, and it is part of the story of the mothers of the intelligentsia that "not more is known of this remarkable woman who made possible others' greatness while leaving no trace of her own" (Kripalani 1962: 34). His mothering was undertaken by several different people, including his sister Saudamini. His elder brother, Satyendranath, and his sister-in-law were formative influences, and their son Surendranath and daughter Indira were his close companions. His third older brother, Hemendranath, who

died early at the age of forty, was directly responsible for his schooling and made perhaps the most crucial contribution to Rabindranath's formation by insisting that the education be in the mother tongue and not in English. Rabindranath wrote in *My Reminiscences* later:

> Learning should as far as possible follow the process of eating. When the taste begins from the first bite, the stomach is awakened to its function before it is loaded, so that its digestive juices get full play. Nothing like this happens, however, when the Bengali boy is taught in English…While one is choking and spluttering over the spelling and grammar, the inside remains starved, and when at length the taste is felt, the appetite has vanished… While all around was the cry for English teaching, my third brother was brave enough to keep us to our Bengali course. To him in heaven my grateful reverence. (Tagore 1917 in Kripalani 1962: pp. 36–37)

Rabindranath was profoundly influenced by his fifth older brother, Jyotirindranath, a musician, composer, poet, dramatist, and artist and a "Prince Charming of the Indian Renaissance" (Kripalani 1962: 37) and his wife Kadambari. Other influential family members were his sister Swarnakumari and her two daughters, Hiranmayi Devi and Sarala Devi.

Then, there was the "servocracy" or the rule of servants. In his *Reminscences,* Rabindranath details how he was made to stay within a chalk circle while the servant who had thought of this ingenious trick, went off instead of minding him. Such disciplining worked to provide the young child with occasions to whet his boundless curiosity about the outside world. He spent hours observing the bathing pool and the banyan tree outside his window. He wrote the beautiful play *The Post Office* about a similar child who imagines the boundless world outside from the glimpses of it that he gets from inside his room. In his school, he promoted the cause of free, unfettered time when a child could do precisely this: observe pools and trees for hours. This was because the most trivial observations could have immense philosophical magnitude:

> Looking back on childhood's days the thing that recurs most often is the mystery which used to fill both life and world. This mystery lurked everywhere and the uppermost question every day was, when would we come across it? It was as if Nature shut her hands and laughingly asked, "What have I got inside?" and nothing seemed impossible. (Tagore 1917 in Kripalani 1962: p. 40)

Further, his time spent with servants undoubtedly developed Rabindranath's ear for Bengali idiom and folklore. The very first nursery rhyme, a common jingle meaning "The rain patters, the leaf quivers," revealed to him the magic of poetry.

> Whenever the joy of that day comes back to me even now, I realize why rhyme is so needful in poetry. Because of it the words come to an end, and yet do not end; the utterance is over, but not its ring; and the ear and the mind can go on and on with their game of tossing the rhyme to each other. Thus did the rain patter and the leaves quiver again and again, the livelong day in my consciousness. (Tagore 1917 in Kripalani 1962: p. 41)

There are two metaphors that Rabindranath uses frequently for his understanding of education. One is that of a boat and its cargo. The other is of a bird and a nest. The mind as a boat may be overloaded with cargo, as his was by his many tutors, at which he merely tipped the boat to send much of the cargo to the bottom of the

water. The bird flies off to the vast unknown from the nest, but is also enclosed and protected in the nest. The parent birds, in another version, cannot, luckily, so do not light lamps to tutor their babies after nightfall. “They have their language lessons in the morning and how gleefully they learn them! But then they do not have to learn the English language” (Tagore 1917 in Kripalani 1962: 44). He also speaks tellingly of a musical instrument that may be sought to be tuned to too high a pitch, at which its strings would snap and it be useless.

The four months of the trip when he accompanied his father to the Himalayas around the age of twelve, were in many ways the most consciously formative years of Rabindranath’s childhood. He learnt of the values of discipline in freedom, of nature as a teacher, the incomparable importance of studying in the middle of nature rather than a city, and the heightened beauty of the sky, birds, and land when set off by Sanskrit verses and Upanishadic teachings.

The final word on his family should be cast in the notion of “the Renaissance,” which is supposedly what took place in Bengal in the later nineteenth century. In Bengal, the impact of English education had produced new classes and consciousnesses, as well as familiarity with European literature and philosophy. After the first flush of the encounter with the West, most educated Indians had also turned to their own past (and continuing) values and practices because of a half-understood conviction that true creativity could arise largely from there. In these experiments that lasted over the second half of the nineteenth century, Bengal was at the forefront in India, and the house of Tagore was at the forefront in Bengal. Rabindra’s brothers were variously creative, and he sang with Jyotirindranath, listened to tales from Indian History with Gunendranath, read voraciously from the library of Satyendranath, and when he wrote a new play, the family was large enough to enact it themselves, complete with music and dance, on their own stage in their family house in Jorasenko. Time and again, the poet gives credit to his elders in his family for not only their warm affection and support of his literary productions, but also for the actual apprenticeship that he lived out under their tutelage, and the sophisticated level of this tutelage that permitted him to be himself and develop at his own pace with all the mistakes he would want to make.

Then, we come to his formal schools. Rabindranath seemed to go to quite a few, even if he did not finally graduate from any. He started with the Oriental Seminary, for which he records how the methods of punishment in this school affected him:

> I have since realized how much easier it is to acquire the manner than the matter. Without an effort I had assimilated all the impatience, the short temper, the partiality and the injustice displayed by my teachers to the exclusion of the rest of their teaching. My only consolation is that I had not the power of venting these barbarities on any sentient creature. (Kripalani 1962: 41).

Rabindranath’s second school was the normal school, supposedly a model school formed on the British pattern. The incomprehensibility of the English used in the school, and the abusive impatience of the teachers with Indian students, were what left the deepest impressions on him. The communal singing of one, supposedly

cheerful, English song, was recalled by him as going something like: *Kallokee pullokee singill mellaling mellaling mellaling.* He deciphered it as an adult as perhaps equaling: *full of glee, singing merrily, merrily, merrily!* with no successful guess at the *Kallokee.*

The family and the school, as I have argued elsewhere (Kumar 2007), come together for the new educated elite of India to produce in the child the perfect success of everything that is best in the West and the East and tries to perform this feat through the alchemy of simple addition. Thus, Rabindranath's day began while it was still dark and went like this:

> Wrestling with a champion professional wrestler; Physiology with a student from the Medical College, who collapsed learning to rote memorization; Mathematics with a tutor, sometimes Natural Science with a tutor; the morning meal of rice, *dal* and fish, and then to school at ten until 4.30. Then Gymnastics for an hour; Drawing with the drawing master; English with Aghor babu, when already dark; Music at assorted times.

The third school we hear about is the Bengal Academy run by a principal named De Cruz. His sojourn there was agreeably interrupted by some months away with his father to the Himalayas, but on his return, he went back to the same school. Finally, he went to St. Xavier's. In all the four schools that he remembered and wrote about, the difference is minimal in the dull and mechanical teaching, the unfriendly relations of the teachers to the boys, and the solemnity of some religious and communal observances. If we were to imagine Victorian schools in England in this period of the 1860s and 1870s, we would be able to recreate little Rabindra's school experiences in greater detail. He finally gave up school at the age of fourteen. Thanks to his family's prosperity and to some degree, eccentricity, he got away with what other middle-class children would not have been able to, though some family members expressed disappointment that he had come to nothing and he himself joked about his lack of qualifications all his life. He did go to school again in England, but again, left without completing a degree.

To complete this section on the formation of Rabindranath, we should look at the language and region of Bengal that he was born to, and in. After all, it was Bengal that produced this impressive litterateur and educator, and not any place else. Is there a discernible explanation or is it a coincidence?

Fortunately, the historian is not called upon to answer such questions definitively. If anything, we can repeat the earlier discussion of the Renaissance and the economic dislocation of Bengal. The Permanent Settlement introduced by Lord Cornwallis and accompanying legal and administrative changes, followed by grossly unequal British terms of trade with India, produced an economic and social turmoil in the Bengali countryside. Poverty worsened, indebtedness increased, without corresponding changes in agricultural productivity, industrialization, education, and social awareness.

Rabindranath was sent by his father to be employed as overseer of the family's estates. In the villages around the Padma river, the ghats or stone steps leading down to the river, the huts and the boats scattered around, and the people and animals inhabiting it all, Rabindranath found peace and meaning. Through sheer

length of observation, and his keen eye, he could penetrate into the inside workings of the myriads of stories of the ordinary people living in the Bengal village. He wrote, of course, beautiful stories and poems about them. But his understanding of "duty" was widened from that of a poet's to a different kind of concern for the people that he came to know so well.

The last dimension to explore in Rabindranath's formation is his religion. His grandmother had been a Vaishnava and Rabindranath devoured the lyrics of the Vaishnava poets Chandidas and Vidyapati, available in an anthology made in 1879. He absorbed their spirit of ecstatic love that leaves its subject unstated, that crosses over mystically from the mundane to the divine, the bodily to the spiritual. His father, who had been a profound influence on his adolescence, was a dedicated Vedanta scholar. The chanting of the Upanishads was a feature in the Jorasanko household and the verses were recited by all in a meticulously correct accent. A curious paradox reined at the heart of the Tagore family religion that perhaps got reflected in Rabindranath's educational experiments to come. Debendranath was a religious reformer, a leading figure in the Brahmo Samaj, Bengal's premier reformist organization. At the same time, *because of* his Pirali status, he was careful about the hard-earned social status of his family, and of himself as patriarch. He did not dabble in social reform and broke with Keshab Chandra Sen to name his branch of the society the Adi Brahmo Samaj.

Rabindranath was influenced by multiple streams: from the servants and women at home, the knowledge of Hindu epics and narratives. From his father's Vedantism as well as from Vaisnava lyrics, the consciousness of the oneness of the universe and the power of love. From his own social contexts and his *upanayan* or sacred thread ceremony, an esthetic and intellectual appreciation for rituals and ceremonies, for the routines of Hinduism that weave together time and space, change, and movement.

Altogether, Rabindranath has left us such a more graphic and richer account of his own formation than have other members of the intelligentsia of his time that my thesis (Kumar 2007) on the formation of the Indian intelligentsia is perfectly illustrated in his writings. What I would like to emphasize here is that he was not exceptional—that all the new educated Indians were thus similarly formed in their homes and in their schools.

10.2 Rabindranath as Educator

When Rabindranath had matured as a man and had his own family of wife, three daughters and two sons, he undertook their education himself. He engaged an English tutor for his elder son, but he was the principal teacher. We may be certain that from the experience of his own misplaced education, his head was full of ideas about how good teaching *should* be. As often happens with people bursting with ideas, the education of their own children is not enough. He already had the possibility of a wider field of action in Santiniketan. He already had the model of Upanishadic teaching and ashram retreats in his head.

He would thus revive the ancient ideal and people his country once again with sages and heroes. He would also replace the soulless and mechanical system of education that the British rulers had imported from the Victorian slums by a new and creative one in which both teaching and learning would be pleasurable. He would combine the ancient with the modern and recreate the old in terms of the new. On 22 December 1901, he inaugurated his school at Santiniketan with five pupils, among them his eldest son, and as many teachers. He named it Brahmacharya Asrama, after the ancient forest hermitages. (Kripalani 1962: 189)

Rabindranath's school and later, university, is deemed to be a nationalist, a Hindu, and an *Indian* experiment. What he built is most easily described by the epithet "Indian." For instance

> These schools are native to the soil like the trees which grow out if it. They are, therefore, not incongruous…. Here India leans upon herself and issues from herself. There is no attempt made to impose something foreign, to uproot or to force, no necessity to guard alien methods by alien instructors. The teachers are Indian, Indian in their habits, in their sympathies, in their dress. (Mukherjee 1962: 66).

The questions I would like to explore in the huge subject of his educational experiment are regarding the nature of the "Indian" in his school, and regarding the nature of the "school" in this Indian school.

For both questions, it is pertinent to ask, did Rabindranath understand the child and the world of the child? An extensively supported theory has it that adults can simply never understand childhood because although they have all gone through it, they have changed so much that they are, as it were, another species (Aitken 1994; Jones 2001). The case of Rabindranath may give us reason to disagree. A poet may conceivably retain or cultivate the totally open but also mysterious sense of the world that characterizes childhood. In Hindu philosophical systems, and in Indian popular lore, a poet, mystic, saint, or wise man, could be to the end of his or her life, like a child. Rabindranath qualifies as one of these "poet mystics," if not a saint. He remained so close to his own childhood that he could, and did, recreate it in loving detail.

> The evenings were passed in activities for which little light was needed. The sparkling chandeliers with their candles and mirrors belonged to a part of the house assigned to the adult world. Children were strictly excluded. They watched the older boys entertaining their guests in brilliant drawing rooms from the darkened verandahs of the inner apartments. Small clay lamps with a single wick were considered sufficient for children and servants…. The smaller the lamp the bigger the shadows it casts. The child watched the figures that grew and dwindled, shifted and swiftly changed, enlarging, elongating, foreshortening, diminishing and magnifying the people from whom they emerged. (Ray 1967: 21–22)

But this empathy aside, at another level, Rabindranath could not be expected to know the world of the child because as an Indian, he lived in a society that had not "discovered" the child yet (Aries 1962). He was married in 1886 when 25 to a girl of 14; his older brother was similarly married at 19 to a girl of 9. Legally, socially and discursively, Indian society did not have a clear delineation of childhood, and no separate identity or space for the child was recognized. What could

Rabindranath put in place in his school for children in the absence of a modern understanding of “children”?

Rabindranath appreciated the *ashrama* system of Indian philosophy, where there were separate stages of life, including the one relevant to a schooling experiment, the “student-celibate.” These stages were not characterized by internal qualities, but more by rights, responsibilities, and relationships. The celibate-student’s role in this schema was one of tapas, or austere, disciplined work. Accordingly, his students had, among their rules, early rising, bathing in cold water, sleeping on hard surfaces, cleaning and toil, vegetarian food, community service, and simplicity in every regard. They also had: a lot of games, free and unstructured time outdoors, art, music, theatricals and dance, and mingling among themselves without recourse to strict rules or hierarchies. What the Indian theorization left out about the details of how the student should ideally spend his time, Rabindranath filled in from the abundance of his ideas about the wealth of nature, the importance of freedom, the oneness of the self with the whole of creation, and the fundamental innocence of the human spirit before it was bound and gagged by modernity. So, Rabindranath had a strong intuitive sense of the child that he buttressed by the philosophies of Vedanta and Vaishnavism, and he came up with an ideology of childhood that was a synthesis of the modernist one with his own readings of Indian philosophies.

The idea of the child and of childhood leads directly to the second test of the Indianness of Rabindranath’s school: what kind of a curriculum did he put in place? The information is scattered over several pieces of writing: *Siksa, Siksar Andolan, Siksar Dhara, A Poet’s School, The Centre of Indian Culture, The Parrot’s Training, Chelebala,* and *Jiban Smriti,* as well as in miscellaneous letters and lectures. The question of curriculum is important because we can judge a scholastic experiment by its *technology*: not by the *ideas* about it that its founder espouses, but by the actual pieces that are put in place for the school: the buildings, the philosophy, and the curriculum. Of these, it is the curriculum that we will focus on.

As opposed to the curricula prevalent in government and private schools alike, in Rabindranath’s school, there was no need for a fixed curriculum for children divided by subjects and years and culminating in an examination. Children were to be mixed by age and given a lot of freedom. Each day would begin and end with music, and much of the time was spent outdoors. History was to be taught through performance. Science was to be taught through observation of nature and experimentation. Language was to be the mother tongue and Sanskrit. The aim of the curriculum was not the equipping for a career, and certainly not a government position, as was of the majority of schools that existed. The aim was to experience freedom, to attain the maximum development of one’s personality, or innate attributes, to learn from nature and to exercise what the poet often called “spirituality.” What is “freedom”? What is “to learn from nature”? What is “spirituality” with reference to the curriculum? To some extent, all these were the default after one did away with the ills of mechanization and discipline in modern life. Freedom was based on an unhurried pace and implied the teacher’s ability to organize her

class and students in a way that left them unhurried. It was in opposition to the disciplining in vogue in schools then, which ranged from the mechanical to the brutal, which Rabindranath called "demoralizing" and "a cruel slavery". "It exacts perfect obedience at the cost of individual responsibility and initiative of mind." It kills that "spirit of liberty," "the spirit of adventure," which are essential for fresh experiences and achievements (Mukherjee 1962: 92–101). Freedom was the restlessness that was the very nature of the child, expressed often as naughtiness. To understand and foster it meant not only to encourage the natural abilities of the child to learn, to deny it meant to create adverse effects in children—passivity in the present and cowardice and a lack of intelligence in the future.

In practice, it meant that when Rabindranath was teaching, he "himself followed this practice with remarkable consistency and courage in his own class teaching, that children should not be restrained in the least from spontaneous physical impulses, during the process of their learning, even from laughing, jumping or running about when a class is on, however much this might militate against the conventional notion of class management" (Mukherjee 1962: 371–2). The key to the success of the method lies in whether the other teachers in his school were able to understand and use the method as he was able to. In fact, there were three negative results. One was that he had to constantly recommend the method to his colleagues, apologizing for the "inconvenience" that would accompany it. We know that militant disciplining is always easier for the teacher who wants order in the classroom and Rabindranath's apologizing for the inconvenience is a familiar sign that teachers were not persuaded of the value of freedom in the classroom.

The second problem was that when the teachers are not adept in a method but follow it to some extent, as teachers at his school did with permitting freedom to students, the students are likely to get confused. Instead of accepting the freedom as their right as well as their responsibility to then use intelligently, they could become "boisterous" and "turbulent". "The students at Santiniketan were 'not quite gems of the first water,' as Tagore once humorously put it" (Mukherjee 1962: 372). They gave their teachers a hard time, the problem having arisen from their teachers not having a clear mandate and approach. It did not help that Rabindranath sided with the students rather than the teachers. The "system of freedom cure" that he adopted was one that only he practised and not the other teachers.

The third problem was that although he was proud that "In very few institutions in the world have students been given so much freedom—and this is not a small matter"; he was also disappointed with the results. If teachers are not like-minded, if students are blossoming but their guardians, perhaps, are dissatisfied with their progress, and if the founder is "frequently haunted by the feeling that his true ideals were not being realized in the institution which he felt to be slowly drifting away from his original goal" (Mukherjee 1962: 73)—then that is a situation where the fundamental conundrum of a creative curriculum has not been resolved: How do we translate our ideals into pedagogic practice?

"Spirituality" as an aspect of the curriculum meant many things, among them, meditation, which was practised morning and evening for 15 min each, and the

listening to and chanting of Sanskrit verses. To some extent, it was the pondering over questions such as of the meaning of truth and of knowledge. It included precise practices such as that of self-punishment, based on the Indian tradition of *prayascitta* or the voluntarily inflicted punishment on oneself as retribution for one's guilt.

Perhaps the troubling question for a contemporary educator who has full sympathy with Rabindranath's aims is his antagonism to method. No doubt there are many conflicting theories of educational methodology, some stressing one point of view and others stressing the reverse. No doubt that the methods pioneered by Rabindranath and recommended by him in his school were what "progressive" education consists of. And no doubt that Rabindranath was instinctively a wonderful teacher himself who expected and got a lot out of both the teacher and the student in the manner of the most imaginative and committed teachers. But to successfully transmit the curricula to other teachers at his school without formalization and articulation remained a problem. And the absence of discussion of other methods of teaching and where their own fit within them remained a missing link.

The school had a list of subjects in practice though no actual written record exists of such a list from Rabindranath's own hands. Let us look at the most creative and challenging issues tackled by him in the teaching of subjects.

Bengali, the mother tongue of the students, and English together comprised the problem of teaching languages. Rabindranath believed categorically that it was the mother tongue that must be taught first, and then through its medium the English language. Bengali was to be taught through a combination of literature, drama, music, the epics, debates, and discussions—all of which would create an atmosphere that would envelop the child in a world of ideas and imagination, and this process should not be diluted by introducing a second language for the first several years. While a scientific grammar was necessary—and Rabindranath himself wrote a treatise on the history and structure of Bengali, *Bangla Bhasa Parichay*—he placed grammar second to other techniques of teaching.

In English teaching, Rabindranath may be considered a pioneer in many ways. He advocated oral teaching and dramatization as the first steps, when verbs in the imperative are first taught and then a wider vocabulary through enactment of the verbs. Then came what he called "the comparative method," which consisted of translation from English to Bengali, and at a more advanced stage, from Bengali to English. The structure and idiom of the two languages could thus be assimilated better than the "direct method" in vogue. This approach was based on the assumption of the previous and thorough mastery of the mother tongue. Given the absence of clear formulations of teaching techniques in that time, Rabindranath's *Imreji Sopan* in 1904–06 and ideas about graded progression of lessons, activity and dramatization, use of real objects and real-life situations, liberal reading and free composition, all comprised pioneering work and are, many of them, ideas that synchronize with later developed ideas in progressive teaching. He was also keen on other languages and proposed many of them to be taught in the university Visva-Bharati. For children, starting from the age of eight or nine, he believed that Sanskrit should be learnt, beginning with Sanskrit verses by rote.

Regarding the teaching of Science, Rabindranath had two interesting perspectives. One was that Science had been abused in the West in the interest of economic and political power and needed to be combined with the "traditional spiritual outlook of the East" to bring power to the people. His second approach was that a truly scientific outlook is basically a spiritual one, "for truth is spiritual in itself, and truly materialistic is the mind of the animal which is unscientific and, therefore, unable to cross the dark screen of appearance, of accidents, and reach the deeper region of universal laws" (Mukherjee 1962: 395). Superstition, prejudice, and faith in miracles, long the bane of Indian character, would be removed by the study of Science. Rabindranath asked for the collaboration of all the reputed scientists and scientific associations of the time, such as Professors J.C. Bose and P.C. Roy and the Science Association, and tried to have textbooks written. Most of all, he proposed that the natural laboratory of the world be used: the sky, the rocks, the plants, the flora and fauna, and that observation and collection be done as much as the reading of texts. Like Gandhi, his very Indian practices seemed to cross over to Western scientific method.

The third area for curricular innovation was in the discipline of History. As with Science, he thought that the West had partly got it wrong, at least the periodization of Indian History and the stress on political as opposed to social processes, both of which are ideas that contemporary Indian historians would agree with him about. As with Science again, Rabindranath thought that an indifference to the subject leads to a situation of ignorance that was deplorable. It was essential to know "How men in one's own and in other countries have become great and powerful and have formed groups, and how they have attained and preserved what they have regarded as desirable…. Not to know what man has done and can do on earth is for man lamentable ignorance" (*Itihas*, p 158, in Mukherjee 1962: 398). Again, as with Science and English, he believed that History could be taught not only through novels and plays, but through dramatization and art.

This brings us to the place of art in Rabindranath's ideas about curriculum. Being who he was, he called for a larger role of the esthetic and artistic in education in general. He criticized the mechanical, the utilitarian and the power driven in contemporary practices, and wanted to re-introduce and expand the role of the beautiful and the joyful. He believed that the development of personality and the best achievements of a nation are possible only with the patronage of the arts. As curriculum, the arts had a dual place in his educational venture. First, there was specific teaching of music, dance, theater, and fine arts. As in languages and literatures, Rabindranath certainly did not believe in confining the curriculum to the local, but wanted it to be pan-Indian; thus, there would be different genres and styles from all over India, and if possible, from all over Asia and the world. The masses of India had wonderful repertoires of music and dance, and the Soviet Union had excellent practices of art education for children. But, apart from the teaching of these subjects, Rabindranath wanted simply an atmosphere of music and art at Santiniketan, an instinctive development of taste for the arts rather than formal training in them, and learning from other sources than teachers, such as from nature, from the seasons, and from the villagers. They learnt as well from

himself and those he invited because he was able to bring famous artists and intellectuals to Bolpur. The school was a place of art because he was an artist. As he put it, “When I brought together a few boys, one sunny day in winter, among the warm shadows of the *sal* trees, strong and straight and tall, I started to write a poem… but not in words” (Sykes 1945: 48). Rabindranath’s poetry was expressed tangibly as well, in that he composed songs for the children to sing and poetry for them to recite, and performances for them to put on such as the Autumn and Spring festivals.

10.3 Conclusion

It is truly difficult to evaluate Rabindranath’s contribution to the cause of Indian education. Given the odds he faced: the lack of funds, the lack of supporters, the inadequacy of teachers, and the hostile colonial environment (the state had declared his school illegitimate, that is, its graduates were not to be accepted as graduates) his contribution was immense, even immeasurable. Add to that, his own commitments in his professional life and his need to travel made the school an additional responsibility that he had to bear—and bore superlatively. Finally, there was the utter absence of a legacy that he could inherit.

This last point is what I would like to end on. Is it possible for a single individual to create a radical institution that will stand the test of time, or can change be brought about only with a movement and a generation, at least, of leaders and followers committed to the same vision? Rabindranath belonged to a colonial period in which the main priority had been definitively given to the nationalist movement. He was not going to succeed in putting the state of the education of children in the top priority as long as India was not independent. This colonial-nationalist conundrum had resulted in over 50 years of colonial rule without the emergence of a radical educational philosopher. The closest that Rabindranath could get to for inspiration for his educational philosophy was Upanishadic thought, and in modern times, Rammohan Roy.

Now, Upanishadic thought was very inspiring and incontrovertible in the power of its philosophy. But to be translated into pedagogy in the twentieth century would need close to a lifetime of labor of someone devoted utterly to this translation exercise. As for Rammohan Roy, he did set up schools, but in terms of pedagogy, his message was a simple one: a synthesis between the East and West. Rabindranath went a very, very long distance further in initiating, trying out and revising, actual processes and content to put into operation this attractive goal of an East–West synthesis.

In the context in which he tried his experiment, Rabindranath was a success in breaking new ground that no one had done before. In the context of the educational developments in the whole world and what the requirements of an educational experiment are, he was not equally a success. As a historical figure and an ideologue, a humanist, reformer, and nationalist, he was a success. As an educator,

he was a brilliant flash in the pan, but not truly an innovator whose work set new trends and changed the course of education in India. He would agree. He had a passionate idea, but education demands building a whole technology. "This Visva-Bharati remains only as an idea almost in my mind alone," he observed.

Since his time there have been, and continue to be, educational experiments that would all claim to share the founts of inspiration he had. Mostly, they strive to be "Indian" or "spiritual," and to put into place "the best in the East and the West." They range from the schools of the Ramakrishna Mission to private missionary, secular, and national institutions such as Future Foundations in Kolkata. Do they succeed? The longer discussion requires another place, but the short answer would be: no, to the extent they do not take seriously the role of *technology* in education.

In 1990, almost a 100 years after he started his school, I, together with a group of like-minded people, also started a school in Varanasi, India, that bears an uncanny resemblance to Rabindranath's. We also wished children to be free, to be close to nature, to experience the arts in every turn of their lives, and to realize the full potential of their humanity. Twenty-one years into our school's life, I know that Rabindranath's legacy is powerful not only in the inspiration it gives and the model it provides, but because it can teach so clearly by its own contextualized shortcomings. To not rest on the beauty of one's own vision, a vision that is possible to translate into practice by *oneself only,* but to make the vision *practically realizable* and *replicable* is the most important of these lessons to learn from Santiniketan. It finally does not matter how wonderful an idea one has. What matters is how successfully one can *implement* the idea and *convey* the idea to others. What Rabindranath could have done was to develop the transmissibility, and secondly, to start a debate in the nation about the best possible "Indian" education. Given his moral stature, had he made it into an urgent issue for the nation, there might have been a resolution. He did not do so, because of the historical situation India was in, and because of who he was.

In our own school, we work hard—because we are not Rabindranath and our India is different—to create more and more precise *methods of implementation* of beautiful and grand ideas. And to create wider and wider circles of influence and win over, educate, and train hopefully hundreds and thousands of others. The supreme goal remains: to initiate a dialogue in India that seeks resolution of the question: "What would comprise the best "Indian" education?"

Rabindranath would have approved and supported this. It is a fantastic realization to feel that one is standing in a direct line from such a forbear!

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Chapter 11
The Delineation of the Female Subject in Rabindranath Tagore's Novel *Farewell, My Friend*

Monali Chatterjee

Abstract Following the footsteps of Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Tagore advocated the emancipation of women through his novels, essays, poems, and plays. In order to study their problems closely, he projected women as protagonists in almost all his novels except Gora. For the study of a modern feminine subjectivity within the androcentric matrix of middle-class Bengali society, the author has selected *Shesher Kabita* (1929; *Farewell, My Friend*, or *The Last Poem*). Though, as in his other novels, Tagore does not propose a clear solution, he asserts through the vivid depiction of women that "the relationship between man and woman should be rooted in mutual freedom." Through the cultured yet colloquial tone of the conversations and the essential lucidity of his prose, Tagore deftly focuses on the multifarious roles of women in the domestic life of Bengal.

Keywords Literature · Women's studies · Nationalism · Modernity · Bengali domesticity · *Shesher Kabita* · *Farewell, My Friend*

Among the singular events in Indian literary history was the emergence of Rabindranath Tagore as a major source of influence and inspiration. Tagore was a prolific litterateur with versatile achievements. A poet, short-story writer, song composer, playwright, essayist, an actor, a philosopher, painter, a social reformer, an educationist, and a humanist, Tagore introduced new prose and verse forms and the use of colloquial language into Bengali literature, thereby liberating it from traditional models based on classical Sanskrit. In spite of being the most admired writer in Bengal, Tagore was an unknown figure to the rest of the country till he received the Nobel Prize in November 1913. His appearance before the Indian

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public was sudden, unexpected, and an exciting phenomenon. He was a writer celebrated by the Western world before the Indian literary community discovered him with its own initiative (S.K. Das 192).

The youngest son of the religious reformer Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath was educated at home, but at the age of seventeen, he was sent to England for formal schooling, but he could not complete his studies there. He began initially to write verses and returned to India from England in the late 1870s. Then, he published several books of poetry in the 1880s and completed *Manasi* (1890), a collection of poems that marks the maturing of his genius. It contains some of his best-known poems, including many in verse forms new to Bengali. Some poems embody social and political satire that criticized his fellow Bengalis. He was a leader of the Brahmo Samaj, which was a new religious sect in nineteenth-century Bengal and which attempted a revival of the ultimate monistic basis of Hinduism as laid down in the Upanishads. In his mature years, in addition to his many-sided literary activities, he managed the family estates, a project which brought him into close touch with common humanity and increased his interest in social reforms. On December 22, 1901, he also started an experimental school at Shantiniketan named Brahmacharya Ashrama, modeled on the lines of the ancient *gurukul* system, where he tried his Upanishadic ideals of education. He actively participated in the Indian nationalist movement, through in his own non-sentimental and visionary way; Gandhi, the political father of modern India, was his devoted friend. Tagore was knighted by the ruling British Government in 1915, but within a few years, he resigned the honor as a protest against British policies in India.

In 1891, Tagore went to East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to manage his family's estates at Shilaidah and Shazadpur for 10 years. There, he often stayed in a houseboat on the Padma River (i.e., the River Ganges), in close contact with the village folk, and his sympathy for their poverty and backwardness became the keynote of much of his later writing. He was a prominent figure in the "partition of Bengal" agitation, though he did not subscribe to its wilder form. However, he protested by founding at Shantiniketan, Vishva-Bharati—the rallying center of international culture.

The epithet, "myriad-minded" which Coleridge applied to Shakespeare seems to be equally applicable to Rabindranath Tagore whose long life of 80 years was marked by a ceaseless and torrential flow of creativity manifested in the richness and variety of all kinds of art and literary forms–dance, drama, music, painting, and original organizational activities. Touching the kindred points of heaven and earth, he was both a man of action and of contemplation, a seer and also a pioneer in cooperative movement, a writer of most profound poems and an author of children's textbooks including books of science, a nationalist and internationalist, a man of royal grandeur like his grandfather, a prince, and an ascetic like his father, a *maharshi*. In his philosophy of life, the best of the east and the west is reconciled into a harmonious whole enriching the quality and substance of life which he always saw steady and saw it whole. His life was marked as much by Shakespearean fecundity as by protean plasticity. His inclusive mind aspired after the universal man shining in the glory of creation and *joie de vivre*.

Tagore's unfailing faith in man and divinity, his concern for women and solicitation for children, his sympathy for the poor and the downtrodden, his philosophical speculations and practical wisdom, his perception of the *zeitgeist* and the evolution of taste all find expression in the all-encompassing sweep of his writings in a magnificent synthesis of philosophical profundity and esthetic luxuriance. With the passage of time, Tagore has only grown in stature and is now recognized as an increasingly significant and complex personality. Whether seen as a great sentinel or a complete man, the finest exponent of the Bengal Renaissance or the harbinger of a new age, a majestic personality or a deeply scarred individual, it is rewarding to revisit Tagore—a miracle of literary history—in the light of the women in his novels that were grounded in the social and political conditions of his time. Perhaps this prompted Humayun Kabir to suggest:

Tagore's literary life covers the outline history of the evolution of the Bengali novel. Starting with *The Queen Consort's Fair* which is a weaker version of Bankim's historical writing, Tagore ended with novels like *Farewell, My Friend* or *Two Sisters* which have the sophistication and harshness of the most cynical modern. (Kabir 58)

Like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Tagore also began his endeavors in fiction with a historical novel, *Bau Thakuranir Hat* or *The Queen Consort's Fair* (1883). It was Tagore's first novel and projects obvious traces of Bankim's influence. Tagore achieved recognition as a novelist with *Chokher Bali* (1902—which will be referred to hereafter as *Binodini*). His other vivid and lively novels are *Naukadubi* (1906), *Gora* (1910), and *Shesher Kabita* (1929—henceforth referred to as *Farewell, My Friend*), *Jogajog* (1929), and *Char Adhyay* (1934). In each of his novels, he has mirrored the sore points of contemporary social life, particularly the innumerable instances of social injustice, especially to women. He also held up "the ideal of self-reliant Indian women, fighting not only for their own rights but also for those subjugated nationality and the down-trodden humanity" (B. Majumdar 1). These women characters may be seen as models of modern Indian female subjectivity, instrumental in heralding the age in which we live and continuing to resonate toward a more egalitarian Indian society.

Featuring some of the major issues of contemporary society, Tagore attacks the orthodox customs of Hindu tradition which included child marriages, the dowry system, and so on. This is best exemplified in *The Wreck* where Kamala suffers as the most miserable victim of an accident in which two different boats containing two marriage parties were wrecked. While Hemnalini, an educated *Brahmo,* is the precursor of the other modern woman characters like Sucharita, Lolita, Labanya, and Ela of his later novels, Brahmo and Hindu religious conflicts break up family relationships, as in the case of Kshemankari. Binodini in *Chokher Bali* is not the daughter of a rich person, yet a European Missionary woman is engaged to educate her. It dramatizes the struggle of a young, beautiful widow for self-actualization and selfhood in a social system that denies all scope for such attempts. Sucharita and Lolita in *Gora* are highly educated without being enrolled in a college. *The Home and the World* records Bimala's transition from her secluded life in a *zenana* to national politics. In *Chaturanga*, Damini flouts Hindu

orthodoxy and Vaishnavism to assert her existence as an independent individual in the society. Sharmila in *Two Sisters* faces crisis in her relation with her husband due to her motherly affection for him. Similarly, in *The Garden*, Niraja suffers emotional turmoil and insecurity when Sarala extends a helping hand to her husband during Niraja's illness. This anguish can be found in the mind of every wife who feels that her connubial relationship has been threatened. *Char Adhyay*, or *Four Chapters* explores Ela's unfulfilled love for Atindra, due to the conspiracy of Indranath who perceived her only as an object of sex and desire.

Following the footsteps of Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Tagore also advocated the emancipation of women through his novels, essays, poems, and plays. In order to study their problems closely, he projected women as protagonists in almost all his novels except *Gora*. According to M. Sarada, Tagore brought to the attention of the society some of the issues concerning women including,

1. the plight of widows in the joint families who are economically exploited and prevented from remarrying;
2. the struggle of the modern educated young women for equality and freedom in the male-dominated conservative society, and
3. the complications that arise in the family setup when the modern women participate in the freedom struggle. (129)

He feels that the problems resolve themselves as a result of responses from society (Idem.). The artist and the student of the human heart, in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Tagore afford "a holistic and objective picture of life and makes us realize its glory and pathos." (Sastri 397) This paper focuses on the women characters in *Shesher Kabita* (1929; *Farewell*, *My Friend,* or *The Last Poem*), thereby relating it to various aspects of Tagore's critical theory.

Shesher Kabita through its sensation, sharp wit, vigor, entertainment and repartee, re-established Tagore in the realm of modern unconventional versatility. It has the sophistication and harshness of the cynical modern and is unique in intent and content. Its grave principle raises it above the level of a common love story. By means of an unconventional and distinct idiom Tagore asserted the individuality and position of women in the society. Through Bimala, he had initiated a revolution in *The Home and the World*. According to Kabir, this revolution was "confined and consolidated" in *Farewell*, *My Friend.* (54) It explores the most modern feminine subjects in Tagore's works and anticipates his intuition of things to come. The characters in *Farewell*, *My Friend* belong to the same sophisticated society, class, and educational background. Educated men and women share many aspects in common, but they also have their own individual identity and idiom, which resemble figments of Tagore. In the novel, Tagore juxtaposes different points of view through the characters of Amit, Labanya, and Katie. His assertion of the importance of human values above everything else is reflected in this novel through the separation of Amit and Labanya. Set in Shillong, this love story centers on Labanya and Amit Rai. The characters of Yogamaya, Sobhanlal, and

Ketaki help in the development of the content of the slight story. The chief idea of the story is rooted in the psychological transformations that take place in Labanya and Amit as a result of their love entanglement. The story opens on a motor collision when Amit's car dashes against Labanya's. This chance collision soon develops into friendship and love, encouraged by Yogamaya, Labanya's employer and guardian. Sobhanlal, an old student of Labanya's father loves her secretly but fails to win her favor. Later, she reciprocates the love of Amit. However, she realizes that being fickle and a poet Amit cannot share the responsibilities of a married life. In spite of her misgivings regarding the success of their marriage, Labanya gives her consent for the betrothal. The narrative takes a sudden turn when Ketaki, Amit's erstwhile beloved arrives in Shillong. The story closes abruptly soon after Amit marries Ketaki. Moreover, Labanya decides to marry Sobhanlal and informs Amit about it. This witty and entertaining story carries a serious message in its core.

Labanya is the daughter of Abanish Dutt, the principal of a college in Western India. She is tall, slim, with a lustrous, brown complexion and large, luminous, dark eyes. She is radiant with the light intelligence, serenity, born of the profound poise of a calm and balanced mind. She is an ardent student of literature and history. Her distinct appearance and candor, like that of Maggie in George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss*, entices Amit at the first meeting. She has immense dignity and self-respect. She is rivaled by Sobhanlal both in the academic performance and in her claim to her father's affection. She is intolerant of anyone who attempts to humiliate her but is considerate, practical, and not driven by emotions. This can be seen when her father wishes to marry a widow at the age of forty seven but hesitates to do it in her presence. Without any complaint, Labanya leaves the place and never complains against it. Her sturdy spirit of independence sets her apart from the other heroines of Tagore. Soon after being appointed as a tutor, she refuses to subsist on her father's savings. This episode also reveals how her desires transcend far beyond material wealth. Amit had held the opinion that since women cannot indulge in despotism or bind others, they have the power to drug the victim with the help of opiates, supplied to them by Nature's devilry. However, it may be due to her above-mentioned qualities that this view changes soon after he meets Labanya.

Katie or Ketaki Mitter appears more like a caricature or a type representing a class of women who were blind imitators of the European culture. Her brother Naren Mitter was an affluent man who had stayed in Europe for a long time and was Amit's friend. She was Amit's first love and was engaged in England to him when she was eighteen. Tagore has drawn a pen picture of Ketaki with irony and devastating wit. Like foreign liquor distilled, Katie's manners were thrice refined and concentrated of foreign make. In contrast to the average Bengali girl's pride in her long hair, she had applied scissors to her own, converting them, like a tadpole's tail, to a semblance of bob. She applies enamel over her naturally fair complexion and her eyes, once gentle and serene becomes too lofty to rest on the commonplace. Her lips bear a sneer and the cigarette held between her manicured

fingers serves as an embellishment rather than smoking. Her attire seems artificial, and her high-heeled shoes complete all the nuances of the sophisticated gait that she strives to achieve.

Amit Rai is an affluent Oxford-educated barrister and an outstanding conversationalist. At the beginning of the novel, Amit has been described as an intelligent and gifted young man who exemplifies the "very acme of sophistication and mental culture but whose proneness to romanticism and narcissism will prevent him, in the ultimate analysis, from manifesting any true love for any one." (Raj 75) He is obsessed with style. His manners and habits are completely anglicized. He sets out to ridicule the high society with a dazzling display of non-conformity in dress and behavior and a coruscating wit. He sports native dresses for not being in vogue among his set. He revels in shocking people with his smart sayings which are champions of feminism by declaring that the despotism of women will be more terrible than that of man. (Singh 71).

He is invested in Western culture but is also not integrated or consistent within. With his ephemeral fancies, he is not expected to evince any genuine love for anyone. However, when he meets Labanya, a mutual fascination takes place. Simultaneously, his memories of Katie, his fiancé with whom he had been betrothed for 7 years, blurs away completely. His relationship with Labanya helps to overcome his superficiality and puts him in contact with his own depths. But culturally, this results in his reverting to the traditional male-centered familial order and opting to marry Ketaki.

Yogamaya is one of the most mature and sophisticated widows drawn by Tagore. She had bridled her rebellious thoughts through the study of the Puranas. This forty-year-old widow of Varadashankar belongs to an educated, modern family. As the mistress of her house, she immediately senses beneath the literary devotion of Amit and Labanya a deeper and mutual devotion. Despite her age and shrewdness, she has a tender heart. Being intelligent and insightful, she immediately perceives the possibility of a perfect match between Labanya and Amit. At the same time, she apprehends that Amit is not sufficiently mature to marry. She played a crucial role in fostering friendship between Labanya and Amit and in their subsequent union. She sympathizes and understands the conflict in Labanya when she decided not to marry Amit. Her tactful use of words in a critical situation like Ketaki's arrival spares Labanya from further humiliation from Katie.

The reversal of roles is another witty and humorous device that Tagore has deployed to bring home the fact that the fulfillment of love demands a high price for all those who are involved and they should be prepared for the worst possible circumstances. For example, when Amit gets drenched inside a dilapidated hut during a heavy downpour, he tells Yogamaya that he is performing the penance Uma had once undertaken to become Lord Shiva's wife. Her penance was in the Himalayas, his is amid the hills of Shillong. Yogamaya has assumed the role of Narad, the match-maker.

Labanya's realistic and practical outlook to life is evident from the way she refuses to be carried away by emotions even in matters of love. She knows that

Amit regards marriage as vulgar. She points out that it is too respectable; it is the luxury of the scripture-quoting worldlings, who loll on fat cushions and reckon their wives among their goods and chattels. Thus, she rebels against the harsh idea of treating the wife as a commodity in astonishingly gentle tones. She projects her natural acceptance of the facts of life with self-dignity. She can delve deep into the minds of men. Amit's proposal for marriage does not thrill her. She is aware of his inconsistency in his commitments and that his mind hovers over women without alighting on them. She knows that Amit adores her idealized image, and hence, her marriage with him would not be a success. Thus, she declines his offer but charms him by her reasoning. Remaining firm in this resolution, she explains to Yogamaya the true cause for the refusal: She fears that she will have to sacrifice her individuality to please her husband. By this means, Tagore demonstrates the social inequality in the emancipation of men and women at the elite level in his times. The so-called emancipated male is still comfortably ensconced in a patriarchal system which offers him a flattering superiority. Labanya is conscious of this and protects her freedom. She tells Yogamaya that Amit is attracted to her only as a source of inspiration for his poetry.

Amit's two sisters Cissie (Shamita) and Lissie are appareled in the latest brand of fashion. With their modish pet names, they have been shown as having fully imbibed modern fashions. Laces, amber, and coral dazzled their saris. They trip while walking, squeak while talking, they laugh in a crescendo of squeals, tilt their heads, smiling winsomely, darting quick sidelong glances. Their rosy silken fans often flutter about their cheeks. Their demeanor artificial and they bask on their admirers' mock impertinences. Even when they set off for a sojourn in Darjeeling, they are wrapped in their cloaks of imitation Persian shawls, with dainty up-to-date parasols and they flaunt their tennis rackets.

The names like Katie, Cissie, Lissie, and Bimie are both unconventional and Anglicized Indian names. In fiction, the baneful effect of Western culture and education on women has figured in the image of these women with high-heeled shoes. This image has been disapproved by not only other characters but also by the author himself. The inherent contradiction underlying the scheme of women's education and emancipation desired by men can be clearly discerned. Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes that women have gained only what men have agreed to grant, they have not taken anything out of their own initiative, they have only received what the men wanted them to. (cited in Mukhia 24)

The literary frame of Amit's mind makes each of his experience rolling a wave of words to his mouth. Hence, he needs Labanya who firmly believes that love finds its true fulfillment not in union but in freedom. This conviction makes her generous and sympathetic toward Ketaki, her rival. She soon learns about Amit's previous engagement with her. Amit and Ketaki had even exchanged wedding rings, but Amit had postponed the marriage. In these seven years, Amit's outlook, knowledge, and overview of life gradually improve and mature. From an Anglicized, fastidious snob, he becomes thoroughly Indian. His infatuation to Labanya erases Ketaki out of his memory. Labanya considers Amit's friendship higher than romance. She makes Amit realize that his own indifference has

converted Ketaki into a semi-nude foreign doll. The scene, in which Katie throws the ring of Amit's betrothal on the table while tears flow down her enameled cheeks, marks the turning point in the novel. (Singh 76) Labanya introspects and resolves her conflict when Amit reports to her about the heart-wrecked Sobhanlal. She painfully recollects how she had arrogantly turned down Sobhanlal's offer of love and is deeply moved to find that with a sad heart he had waited for 7 years and adored her. Her gesture toward Sobhanlal does not create a sense of her betrayal for Amit; rather, by her prudent action, she avoids the possibilities of troubles in future. She is certain that Amit's genius would shine only in "the freedom of separation and not in the bondage of union with her." (B.C. Chakravorty 214–215) Among the heroines of Tagore, Labanya is the first to achieve a postgraduate degree and earn her own livelihood, observes M. Sarada. (105) Tagore reveals how the development of education and modernization of society had caused the problems of women to multiply and nothing remained straightforward any longer. Being conscious of this change, the modern, educated women exercise great discretion while selecting their spouses, from the view point of mental compatibility and autonomy. Sanjukta Dasgupta rightly observes the following:

She enshrines the best qualities of modernity and intelligence, and becomes an embodiment of what Tagore considered the essential qualities of a modern Indian woman. She is invested with the harmonious temperament of a woman able to contend with the urbane wit of Amit while adhering to the fundamental values of a still typically traditional society. Instead of falling for the latest fashions of the West, she has imbibed the positive attributes of a Western education. Labanya is modern in a strictly Indian way. Unlike Ketaki, Labanya's modernity emerges from a rare assimilation of modern Western attitudes into essentially Indian values. (Sen and Gupta 188)

Labanya represents a modern Indian femininity by internalizing from the humanistic tradition of Europe and transforming this into Indian terms. She had accurately observed and realized that Westernization alone cannot be synonymous with modernity. She knew that modernity consisted of a judicious blend of absorbing what is best across all cultures. This is Tagore's own stance, the development of a universal ethics based on a critical comparative study of cultures. Nonetheless, her sound education and sense of morality had guided her to be anything but vain and boisterous but outshine all around her through the light of her wisdom and humility.

The effect of integration and the lack of it have also been represented by Labanya and Ketaki, respectively. It is this integration that prevents Labanya from accepting contemporary Indian/Bengali patriarchy, knowing that Amit cannot but revert to the codes of inequality which structure conjugal social existence. Both, in terms of social structure and mental compatibility, Labanya could perceive that Ketaki would fit more easily into the structure of a traditional conjugal life with Amit. Labanya also knew that if she had married Amit, she would not only be depriving Ketaki of her rightful suitor, but also deprive herself of Sobhanlal's patient and genuine love for her. More pertinently, in the rigid framework of the Bengali patriarchy, Labanya would have been stifled by the bondage of a different class of society had she married Amit.

On the other hand, Ketaki's lack of integration allows her to swing from superficial Western doll to obedient subject of traditional social norms. It was probably because although she had surrendered herself to Amit, he was too fickle to return her favor. Ever since he had loosened his hold and let her go, she had allowed a dozen hands to fall over her and this had made her phony and buffoon-like. Since Ketaki has perhaps no strong convictions about any particular stance, the prospect of losing Amit to Labanya makes her reclaim Amit's favor, although it meant losing her freedom to the rigidity to the patriarchal structure. The stringency of social norms did not stifle her, and she finds her ultimate satisfaction, recognition, and redemptions within the security of the social norms.

According to R.N. Roy, Labanya's breaking of her engagement with Amit and the flow of tears over Katie's enameled face is an utter mockery. Further, he maintains that Tagore has not accounted for the metamorphosis that restores the natural tenderness of her former self. (224) The argument is implausible since parallels have been drawn between the spurning of Sobhanlal by Labanya and Katie by Amit. Labanya's analysis of her situation to Amit is most accurate. Despite her foul temperament, Katie has still retained the embers of affection for Amit burning in her heart and could not bear to part with her beloved. Her transformation can be attributed to her desire of winning Amit back as her lover. However, the reason for coquettish behavior can be ascribed to Amit's evasive and indifferent attitude to her. Compared to all the other characters in the novel, her character undergoes maximum transformation. M. Sarada aptly remarks, "In the gallery of Tagore's women Ketaki is the only example of an Anglicized woman. Though outwardly Westernized, Ketaki had not lost her innate charm. Once her marriage takes place she regains her former natural poise and laughter." (106–107) Of course, another way to look at it is to see Ketaki as an insufficiently integrated subject of national modernity. The call for autonomy and the comforts of traditional patriarchy are two poles between which she swings. These two ways of thinking of Ketaki—the woman with an Indian interior who opts for traditional and conservative structures as against the overtly Westernized she-doll—each privilege a different aspect of Tagore's internal dialog. This tension resolves itself through the privileging of the pull of tradition; the other pole finds its resolution in Labanya, where autonomy integrates the cultural resources of the native, but also has to fall back into a more traditional marriage. The sense of incompleteness this engenders is an index of an unresolved clash of discourses.

The novel demonstrates the existence of the real and the ideal. For example, contrary to Katie, Labanya is a splendid synthesis of traditional as well as modern qualities of womanhood. Labanya achieved a more dignified image than Katie Mitter. Though she is well versed in all the ways of European culture, she does not blindly ape it. Katie is the Westernized version of Ketaki who belongs to an upper middle-class home. She is a foil to Labanya, and her character accentuates the admirable qualities in Labanya. Through this comparison, Tagore strikes at the root of the ideal which prompted women like Ketaki to abandon everything of their own and imitate the Western culture and manners. (Biswas 76) He subjects this tendency to bitter criticism and advocates a practical approach to life. In various contexts, Katie

represents the common psyche of modern Indian/Bengali femininity. She represents the inability to critically and creatively assimilate the West into an Indian tradition. Labanya wisely points this out to Amit and evinces that his neglect for her had led Ketaki to crave for other's appreciation for her by indulging in the fake trappings of so-called modernity. This psychological solution, however, belies the fact that the more articulate pole of Indian modernity is left hanging. The reversion to tradition thus represents a dead-end without resolution in Tagore's mind. The novel studies the man–woman relationship in terms of character and society rather than of fate or chance. It seems to be "the climax of Tagore's plea for platonic love." (Bhattacharya 77) It is a playful mockery of romanticized love, describes the coming together and parting of two lovers in the Arcadian surroundings of a hill station but whose idealized love cannot withstand the onset of reality. They go their separate ways bidding fond farewells to each other in verse. (Raj 14) But it may be more proper to say that cast in the form of a mock romance, it lays bare the transience and unreality of relationship, forged on romantic idealism. The wistful parting at the end indicates that the love of Amit and Labanya is far from being deep-rooted and they seem to be more in love with ideals than with each other. According to Raj, this explains the absence of emotional struggles and upheaval or laceration of spirit involved in their farewells to each other (80–81). The novel works on two registers—firstly the exploration of modern elite Indian female subjects and secondly the psychology of man–woman relationships in a contemporary Indian social matrix. These two registers are braided together in the story. At the level of imagining, an elite modern feminine subjectivity, whether Tagore finds the Indian or Bengali bourgeois social matrix insufficiently developed in terms of critical and creative consciousness to support an emancipated relationship, is a question left hanging. The novel also enquires whether modern educated women like Labanya remain as free agents without social location to enact the continuing progress of radical critique.

One may be tempted to ponder whether Amit represents a kind of hypocrisy in dabbling in conservative and radical codes—without making a decision or does Tagore propose that, given the constitution of society in his times, the national subject must maintain an ambiguous bivalency as the requirement for an east–west hermeneutics? The novel also raises the question whether it is a prerogative for the male subject as against the female subject, who must maintain her freedom until society offers the conditions of freedom. It is needless to point out that characters like Katie, Cissie, and Lissie represent only types of attitudes that oscillate to fake modernity within the narrow orbit of the prevalent social customs. Amit and Labanya too represent certain types of attitudes, but Labanya could see through the frivolousness of elite society and the succinctness of Amit's attachment for her. She was aware that his infatuation for her would soon wear out and would be replaced by the mundane existence of a inert relationship.

Being revolutionary in his ideas, Tagore favored the replacement of the old order of the society by a new order that was more rational and liberal in outlook, based on the idea of individual freedom. K.R.S. Iyengar rightly observes:

> When he applied his mind to a current problem–social, political, economic–the heart ruled the head; and the heart in its turn, beat in response to abiding intuitions, not the restrictive formulas of creed, caste or custom. The light of the soul's illumination led him…. Whatever the problem, Tagore leapt from the circumference to the centre and seized it in terms of universality. The novels and the short stories are among the most valuable by-products turned out by the great creative forge… but their source of origin unmistakably stamps them with their distinguishing quality. (105)

Tagore rationalizes the cause of disintegrating man–woman relationships in his essay "Nationalism in the West." He points out:

> The living bonds of the society are breaking up, and giving place to merely mechanical organisation. But one sees signs of it everywhere. It is owing to this that war has been declared between man and woman, because the natural thread is snapping which holds them together in harmony; because man is driven to professionalism, producing wealth for himself and others, continually turning the wheel of power for his own sake or for the sake of universal officialdom, leaving woman alone to wither and to die or to fight her own battle unaided. And thus there, where co-operation is natural, has intruded competition. The very psychology of men and women about their mutual relation is changing and becoming the psychology of the primitive fighting elements, rather than of humanity seeking its completeness through the union based upon self-surrender. (Tagore 2002:61)

Tagore pointed out that the dominance over women by men was the cause of many injustices and exploitations. The contribution of women to the progress of men has always been disregarded. Women have lived an obscure existence for centuries, cloistered within the confines of the house. The virtue of fidelity had been imposed upon women by shrewd men to own them permanently. Tagore asserts through the vivid depiction of women in the novels discussed above that "the relationship between man and woman should be rooted in mutual freedom." (Biswas 75) These novels are variations on the eternal triangle of the man–woman relationships played out against the turbulent backdrop of post-Renaissance, fin-de-siècle Bengal. They become socio-literary explorations of the changing position of women vis-à-vis the men in their household and also in the larger political and intellectual climate. They relate to grave issues which rocked the Bengali Hindu society. Through the cultured yet colloquial tone of the conversations and the essential lucidity of his prose, Tagore deftly focuses on the multifarious roles of women in the domestic life of Bengal.

The novel concludes abruptly. Construing Tagore's message in a nutshell, Iyengar observes, "The world is large and conflict is not unavoidable, there is room in this world for love possessive as well as love sacrificing, for beauty fabricated as well as beauty unadorned. (Iyengar 85) In this, Iyengar echoes Amit's sentiments when he distinguished between the two amorous attachments he experienced: "*Ketakir sange amar sambandho bhalobashari, kintu se jeno gharay-tola jal–pratidin tulbo, pratidin byabohar korbo. Ar Labanyar sange amar je bhalobasha se roilo dighi, se ghare anbar noy, amar mon tate shatar debe*." (*Shesher Kabita* 523) "What binds me to Ketaki is love, but this love is like a vessel, which I shall daily draw and daily use. The love which draws me to Labanya is a lake which cannot be brought indoors but in which my mind will swim." (*Farewell, My Friend* 103) Iyengar's reading is of course a pleasant one in terms of the status quo. But there are at least two other ways of interpreting this ending. For one,

we could see this as the schizophrenic constitution of the modern Indian male, with his life compartmentalized between the cultural nativism of the untranslatable "ghora" (home) and the prostitution of public engagement (world). By this reading, Tagore's ending is a reversion to convention with the mark of national failure. The other reading would see the text and its ending in Bakhtinian terms as an unresolved internal dialog, one in which the national male subject (Amit) finds himself bound in traditional codes of patriarchy and cannot effect an integration leading to an alternative modernity, while the national female subject (Labanya) can find such an integration but lacks the power to transform the codes of convention. Such an empirical dead-end should, however, not make us lose sight of the revolutionary potential of a transformed future, one in which the production of an alternative modernity in gendered national subjects is successful not just in terms of private conjugal subjectivity but as the foundation of a nation-making enterprise.

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Chapter 12
Gender, Nation, and the Vicissitudes of *Kalpana*: Choreographing Womanly Beauty in Tagore's Dance Dramas

Esha Niyogi De

> *Who will relieve the beautiful from bondage in the hands of the cruel?/Sundarer bandhan nishthurer hate ghuchabeke?*
>
> Rabindranath Tagore, *Shyama,* 1939

Abstract The last in a series of Tagore dance dramas centering women, Shyama is haunted by a poetic query: "Who will relieve the beautiful from bondage in the hands of the cruel?" Far from being isolated, this troubling linkage of beauty and pleasure with masculinist domination recurs in a number of gender-centered works Rabindranath Tagore wrote late in life. In this essay, the author takes issue with Dipesh Chakrabarty's and Ashis Nandy's positions on nationalist aesthetics and demonstrates how, in such late dance dramas as Chitrangada (1935) and Shyama (1939), Tagore imagined ways to choreograph the desires of marginal women (a warrior, a courtesan) so as to critique nationalist articulations of proper manhood (sexually chastened/celibate; morally elevated) and instead to explore the ethical potential of women-nurtured beauty and sexuality.

Keywords Dance drama · Theater · Feminism · Women's studies · Nationalism · Modernity · Ethics · Aesthetics · Literary theory · Chitrangada · Shyama

In an early essay titled *Sahitya O Saundarya/Literature and Beauty* (1907), Rabindranath Tagore describes a complex connection between literary pleasure, embodied community, and sectarian politics (*Rabindra Racanabali [RR]* 13: 775–780). He argues that even though the *rasa* (relish) of literary imagination has the potential to enable *atmiyata* (kin feeling) between creator, audience, and created character, individual authors arrest this potential as soon as they try to define the *utkarsha* (essence) of *saundarya* (beauty) and *suchita* (purity) in literature and art.

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Tagore attributes the community-making charge of literary creation to the corporeal constitution of language itself in that he sees language as acting upon us erotically, as an *indriyaswarup* or sensory perception. But he also insists that aesthetic sensuality could be deployed for antagonistic body politics that stem from *samprodayik* (sectarian) attitudes (*RR* 13: 775, 780).

Years later, we find Tagore revisiting his early notion of sectarian aesthetics and situating it within the territorial struggles of his world. In an essay published under the potent caption of *Narir Manusatya/The Humanness of Woman* (1928), he diagnoses at the heart of essentialist *kalpana* (imagination) various masculinist attitudes of proprietorship—attitudes which interrelate imperial European imaginations with the output of nationalist authors in his India (*RR* 13: 21–29). It is not irrelevant to note that precisely in this last phase of his aesthetic critique, Tagore also is experimenting with song-and-dance dramas which center women at the same time that they explore bodily movement as a sensory language. In a letter written to Amiya Chakravarty in 1938, Tagore maintains that, through the song-and-dance mode, he is striving for a form of communication which exceeds the accepted (*chalti*) structures of *bakyersrishti* (sentence-making) (*RR* 25: 434).

What do we make of an aesthetic trajectory such as Tagore's—which insists on connecting artistic imagination with the sexually aggressive and territorial mentalities of a colonized world at the same time that it seeks an aesthetic language at odds with the grammars of national imaginations? As primarily an aesthetic thinker, Rabindranath Tagore, in my view, was deeply concerned with the role imaginations and symbolic abstractions—of the beautiful, the pleasing, and the good—play in reinforcing structures of domination and control. Increasingly disillusioned by the militant and divisive forms of nationalism he encountered around the world and also at home, he became more and more inclined to conceive of the human in ways which question the homogeneous formations stemming from nation-based structures (De, 73–114; Chap. 2). The works Tagore produced during and after the First World War, as Abu Sayeed Ayyub notes, manifest an explicitly humanistic temporal agency—a "sense of time and consciousness of [needful social] activity" for change (84).[1] In the spirit of activist humanism, Tagore in this phase strives to engage in what is well described as a "dialectic of opposites" (Said, 43) between the activist and his historical consciousness.[2]

Hence, he wants to take responsibility for what he comes to see as the masculine core of the territorial mentality interrelating national rivalry with imperial expansionism: the manipulation of femininity and desire. The comments quoted above on artistic imagination and sexual power capture this attempt. A number of

[1] This observation resonates with Promothonath Bishi's in *Rabindrakabyaprobāaha* (201–210). For a succinct and insightful assessment of Tagore's drama in a vein similar to Sankha Ghosh, see also Asitkumar Bandyopadhyay, *Adhunik Bangla Sahityer Sankhipta Itibritta* (120–126).

[2] For a prescient reading of post-colonial textual politics along these lines, with emphasis on South Asia, see Aamir Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony.*

works Tagore produced late in his life are noteworthy in this regard. They struggle self-critically against accepted (i.e., *chalti)* grammars of gender portrayal. They try, at the same time, to reimagine women's autonomous desire and responsible sexual relations in other pleasing ways. Among these, the woman-centered dance dramas are especially significant instances of this male author's self-critical imagination because they attempt to mobilize multiple media—the dancing body, song lyric, music, color and costume, and lighting—in order to question standard articulations of pleasant femininity and proper manhood and to explore the ethical potential of womanly desire vis-à-vis masculine power and control.

If post-colonial critics write extensively on the role aesthetic imaginations play in the reinforcement of national hierarchies and imperial power (McClintock, 21–74; Chap. 2), some present culturally nuanced arguments regarding the subversive or radical potential in imaginations of beauty and goodness. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for one, points out that artistic practices could enable creative thinkers of the non-West to subvert modern power structures, rather than only strengthen their bases. He points to Bengali nationalists who aestheticized the "pleasant" ideals of the patriarchal Bengali family and the patrilineal clan or *kula* in a way marking "a crucial difference between the ideology of Bengali modernity and some of the critical assumptions of patriarchal liberalism in Europe" (225, 228). On his part, Ashis Nandy takes the additional step of underscoring the anti-imperial ethics underlying conceptions of familial femininity by critical Indian thinkers. He maintains that Tagore's works place women's "maternal selves" over and above their "conjugal selves and sexuality" such that these portrayals uphold "the authenticity and authority of the feminine self which serves as an organizing principle of the Indic civilization" (41). Nandy's radical claim is that native Indic principles of self-surrendering maternity and sexual chastity (abstinence from pleasure) constitute a deep critique of the "values embedded in the masculinized world of nationalism and nation-state" and encapsulated in the "egalitarian patriarchy" (42) of Victorian family life. While engagements with aesthetic nationalism such as these by Nandy and Chakrabarty certainly resonate with my observation that Tagore's imagination is politicized, they obviously depart from my emphasis on the gendered pressures of self-critique therein. I part company with the positions on aesthetic politics held by these thoughtful critics because, in their different ways, they both endorse historical difference at the cost of reducing the contestations that transpire within the alternative cultures and also across their borders.

No doubt Nandy himself is careful to distinguish between the overtly "masculinized" voices of mother-privileging nationalism and such discerning thinkers of civilizational principles as Tagore and Gandhi, whereas Dipesh Chakrabarty is forthright in stating that he does not "defend" the patriarchal ideals of aesthetic nationalism in Bengal (214). Nonetheless, these two critical approaches to anti-imperial aesthetics converge in their emphasis on how Indian imaginations differ from the premises of Enlightenment imagery. This unilateral emphasis on historical difference—and on the ethical edge of difference, in Nandy's estimation—tends to homogenize the politics of difference. It prevents us from noticing, for example, the multiple and conflicting accents within nationalist conceptions of

beauty and goodness. The larger implication of the position on aesthetic difference taken by such anti-humanist critics as Chakrabarty and Nandy, as I argue in my larger study of Bengali aesthetic politics, is that it occludes how the self-critical and dialectical aspects of Enlightenment humanism travel into modern Indian aesthetic practice—in what ways they root themselves and intertwine with preexisting traditions while entering into transcultural "arguments" (Appiah, 264) about justice and freedom (De, 1–34).[3]

I show below that in selected dance dramas and allied writings on women and gender, Rabindranath Tagore was striving for ideas and for expressive modes to argue against a chivalrous project in which he himself once had been deeply invested—namely the Indian nationalist project of pitting the moral superiority of pleasant Indian motherhood against the aggressive masculinities being produced by Western empire and urban capital. In the wake of the First War in Europe and militant nationalism at home, Tagore no longer could rest satisfied with these binary sexual politics of resistant nationalism. Instead, he sought for a transnational "cooperation between people" that could battle "isolation," (Dasgupta, 7) territoriality, and nativist attitudes. Hence, he struggled to think through the roots of separatist aggression here and there; in that process, he tenaciously revisited and rethought the sexual bases of sociopolitical aggression. In some of his woman-centered productions late in life, Tagore was striving for a form of associative life that would go against the grain of dominant male agendas, fostering communication and also arguments around a common human future. It is far from coincidental that Tagore also sought to experiment in these works with the tools of communication—language itself and the expressive forms of song and dance. To develop cooperative ways to communicate pleasure and beauty, avoiding antagonistic body language and expressive code, he and his troupe turned to an eclectic set of aesthetical practices and philosophies. These were drawn as much from the everyday folk forms of India as from the other parts of Asia and Europe which Tagore traversed and intellectually explored in this phase of his life. At the same time, Tagore's aesthetic engagements with femininity and gender were invariably constrained and unconcluded.

My point of the readings below, in other words, is not to stake an ontological faith in the exceptional capacity Tagore and his like have to transcend complicity. I attempt to uncover the (imperfect) critiques Tagore levels in multiple affective and expressive modes against patriarchal and proprietary attitudes. These critiques, in my view, go hand in hand with explorations of women's independent desires. A reading of Tagore's feminist dance drama *Chitrangada* along these lines leads us to the gendered play of law and desire in his last, and relentlessly self-critical, dance drama *Shyama.*

In his two versions of *Chitrangada*—produced, respectively, in 1892 as a poetic play (*Chitrangada*, 9–61) and in 1935 as a dance drama (*RR* 25)—Tagore retells a story from the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* in somewhat different ways. It is arguable

[3] See my discussion of "transcultural" aesthetic politics in *Empire, Media, and the Autonomous Woman.*

that the alterations inflected to Tagore's changing positions on nationalism and gender and grew increasingly self-critical as a result. Both versions follow the epic in narrating that whereas, at divine behest, Princess Chitrangada had been raised by her father as a boy and schooled in princely duties, she experiences desire after meeting the epic hero Arjun. She pursues an erotic relationship after breaking him away from his temporary ascetic pursuit of celibacy and eventually ends up as his wife. The 1892 depiction poses several telling contrasts to the dance drama to follow: Princess Chitragada is portrayed as being on a solitary pursuit of the ascetic hero; as aided right from the outset on her path of heterosexual desire by the Hindu male godheads of erotica and sexual youth, Madan and Basanta; and as charting the *telos* of female sexuality by depicting how the woman grows out of her youthful state of abandoned desire (reflecting prevalent masculine views of uncontrolled feminine nature or *strisvabhava*) into the pleasant and chaste femininity of epic hero Arjun's potential wife. The dance drama version, on the other hand, shows that Chitrangada realizes her autonomous worth—sexually, emotionally, and intellectually—not through her relations with Arjun but on her own and amid her same-sex companions or *sakhis*. More broadly, it suggests that to self-actualize in this pleasant way, the woman must first exit male imaginations of all categories—mythical/epical, sociopolitical, and personal—such that she is able to reclaim her status in society through rectifying the possessiveness and instrumentality in these categories. In conjunction with his dramatic team, Tagore not only was rethinking in the dance drama his own prior nationalist assumptions about women in the vein of his *Narir Manusatya/The Humanness of Woman,* as quoted above. He also was rebutting contemporary Hindu nationalist misogyny and clarifying the difference in his approach.

Noteworthy among the latter was the attack dramatist D.L. Roy had leveled against Tagore's early version of *Chitrangada.* Roy's charge was that Tagore had misappropriated the Hindu epic through depicting the princess as a prostitute-like profligate woman self-indulging with her lover Arjun and therewith desecrating the virtuous chastity of daughter and wife depicted by the original epic (1916) (1: 213). Within the larger gender politics of early twentieth-century Bengali nationalism, Roy tussled with Tagore over the current trend of celebrating cultural figureheads of masculinity or *birpuja*; whereas Tagore's early writing shared in the proclivity to glorify Indian male valor, his late works were fundamentally rethinking that glorification in light of escalating Hindu nationalist militancy (Mukhopadhyay 2: 378–379). Such dance dramas as *Chitrangada* and *Chandalika* were immersed in these politics of re-evaluating various nationalist positions on masculinity: D.L. Roy's as implied in his attack on *Chitrangada*, Vivekananda's in his explicit endorsement of celibate ascetic valor, and perhaps also M.K. Gandhi's in his politicized endorsement of male celibacy through experiments with abstinence.[4] As the dance dramas reveal, Tagore was

[4] For details of the agreements and disagreements between Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, see *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates Between Gandhi and Tagore* 1915–1941, compiled and edited, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya. Bhattacharya presents a succinct overview of the debates in his Introduction.

concerned about the territorial implications these male identity politics had vis-à-vis women's autonomous desires.

The dance drama *Chitrangada* was produced at a time when Tagore was explicit in his intention of writing narider pakhya niye (from the side of women) (quoted in Sarkar, 35). The work begins by clarifying that sexual coercion is involved in the overlapping social and aesthetic filiations constituting the image of an epic Hindu heroine in the current nationalist context. The initial narrative sequence clarifies, in other words, some ways that conventional nationalist imagination of the epical Hindu woman wants to reinforce a transparent paternity and cohesive genealogy at once for religious-mythic, literary, and social notions of women. The drama opens with depictions of the manly woman Chitrangada out with her followers on a princely hunt, of her experience of being seen as a little boy and thusly patronized by the adult hero Arjun, and thereafter of her new feeling of a feminine desire hitherto suppressed under male upbringing. This exposition of Chitrangada's new self-actualization unravels multiple ancient and contemporary Hindu hierarchies of heterosexual relations. It implies that hierarchy not only underlies the epic, but it also propagates through current nationalist literature and also through social texts that perceive women to be turning into secondary/infantile men if given *strishiksha* (education) and permitted public mobility (Sarkar 40; Chakravarti 200–224).[5] The larger point is that the coercion of women's bodies is endemic in the order of Indian modernity. For this order combines the Hindu tradition of deifying high-caste patrilines—portraying them as descendents of divine sages as found in the notions of *kula* and *gotra*—with the Victorian tradition of glorifying the publicly active male adult (configured by Bengali nationalists as the ideal modern *bir* or valorous man). Eventually, Chitrangada is able to stray from these social and aesthetic structures when she self-realizes desire amid her same-sex companions or *sakhis,* rather than through her initial (heterosexual) dependency upon Arjun.

The ensuing song-dance numbers strive for a "blissful" rhetoricity of desire flourishing through same-sex support. In her book *Nritya* (1949), the Tagore troupe's principal choreographer Protima Debi, Tagore's daughter-in-law, notes that while the dance numbers in *Chitrangada* combine a variety of Indian folk forms, they lean toward the Northeast Indian tradition of Manipuri dance (24–25). It is noteworthy that the Manipuri tradition casts Vaishnavite performances such as the Raslila into dance drama versions (Vatsayan, 108). Protima Debi also emphasizes that, rather than stay only within the typicality of native forms, *Chitrangada* incorporates as well the dramatic accentuation and directionality of passion to be found in European dance practice (25). These *sakhi* scenes present an eclectic transcultural aesthetic depicting the growth of pleasant desire in the body/mind of the woman. As such, they radically depart from the attribution of

[5] Tanika Sarkar presciently delineates the nationalist argument that education turns a woman into a pseudo-man. See especially her "Mrinal Anya Itihaser Sakshar." See also Chakravarti. See my discussion in Chap. 1 of *Empire, Media, and the Autonomous Woman* on women's education in colonial India.

pleasantness to chaste maternity and its basis in objectified female desire. Since the Tagore troupe's performances far predate my time, and *Rabindrik* dance traditions have altered in subsequent eras, I explore how choreographic and performative imaginations coalesce in the aesthetic by looking at selected song lyrics; on Protima Debi's testimony, these lyrics by Tagore formed the bulwark of their choreographic conceptions (24). Noteworthy in regard to the aesthetic of autonomous feminine desire are two lyrics, the first turning inward and the second embracing same-sex support.

Soon after being attracted to Arjun and facing rejection, Chitrangada performs a solo as she heads out to bathe in the river. The lyric implies a dialectical choreographic design. Here and in subsequent discussions of dance, I am drawing on Susan Leigh Foster's important position that innovations of choreography—i.e., the organizing of performative space in complement with bodily movement—could go either way: They could impart upon embodied space a "stillness that masquerades as omniscience" from a bird's eye historiographic view, or they could enable bodies to be critically ambulatory, to think and write themselves against the grain of historical narratives (7–11). Ambulatory critique undoubtedly is demanded by the bathing song. Mingling the erotic with critical analysis, the lyric unpacks the value system that had "bestilled" (Foster 7) Chitrangada's self-growth, that of patriarchal domesticity. Implying that sexual coercion constitutes the patriarchal family—and reinforces allied imagery of the beautiful and pleasant home—the lyric suggests that to plumb the depths of her desire, the woman cannot do other than break away from the family home and its proprietary attitudes. Unmistakable here are resonances of Vaishnava *bhakti* literature portraying the love trysts of the self-surrendering feminine devotee—the one en route to *lila* or a sexual/spiritual love play unmediated by domestic-worldly interests (of property and dynasty):[6]

> *Shuni Khanekhane, mane mane*
> *Atala jaler aaobhan*
> *Mano raynaraynarayna ghare, Chanchalopran. Bhasaya dibo apanare bhara joare,*
> *Sakalabhabona-dubanodharay*
> *Karibo snan (RR 25: 135).*
> Time and time again do I hear in me The beckoning of depthless waters, My mood stays not, stays not at home Restless is my mind.
> On high tide will I float myself,
> My worries I will wash away in a forgetful stream.

These words picture Chitrangada not only to be journeying away from the confine of her *ghar* or home but also to be sweeping aside the "worries" of boundary-crossing; they seem to entwine the self-surrendering sexual/spiritual quest of *bhakti* with the self-centering individual's dialectical quest of freedom from customary strictures. While we should be alert to these overlaps, however, we cannot reduce Chitrangada's journey to either conceptual category. For neither

[6] See Dimock (48–49). See also, Sushil Kumar De. For notions of self-surrendering versus self-loving desire (*parakiya* and *swakiyaprem),* see Inden and Nicholas (24).

is it an ideal quest for an androcentric divinity nor an atomistic *telos* of freedom from custom in the vein of Romantic humanism (Mill, 125).

To begin with, even though subsequent lyrics continue in the Vaishnava vein to show how the love-torn Chitrangada is collectively nurtured in her pleasant desire by same-sex companions, they also depart from that vein by presenting the collective feminine pursuit as androcritical rather than androcentric (as in the Vaishnava tradition of *bhakti*). Her companions are shown to be responding to Chitrangada's call to adorn her anew such that she overcomes the *lajja* or shame of being discarded as an emaciated bare branch (*shunyashakha*) by the male hero:

> *Ananda chanchal nritya ange ange bahejak*
> *Hillolehillole, Jaubana pak sanman bancchitosammelane* (136).
> Let the restless dance of bliss vibrate you limb and limb, Let it surge and surge.
> Let youth discover its dignity, In the desired union.

Unmistakable in these lines is an emphasis on the corporeality of a flesh-and-blood woman who desires and who seeks reciprocity. The concreteness of imagery calls for a this-worldly choreography and performance—of an organizing of womanly bodies and desires such that they move with and "alongside" one another (Foster 10) to actualize the rhythmic rhetoric of a women's support community. Note also that here Tagore's deployment of the word *lajja* implies a radical critique of the current bourgeois parlance on the gentlewoman's or *bhadramahila*'s modest shame. The gentlewomanly *lajja* was tied to chastity and, in other words, to the metaphoric (and real) draping of a woman's erotic body.[7] Chitrangada's *lajja* signifies not at all a modest draping of the woman's erotic potentiality, but rather her humiliation in not being recognized by the man as an erotic person in her own right. To redress this fundamental devaluation of corporeal humanity, her *sakhis* reciprocate Chitrangada's call for her renewed adornment with a song and dance invoking the pleasure of erotic bliss in her.

Beyond this, even though Chitrangada's corporeal autonomy is enabled, her path leads not to free self-expression but back to masculine confinement. In this instance, Arjun's eye persists in looking conventionally, as he fails to recognize beauty in the self-adorned Chitrangada. He repudiates her erotic advances on the plea of his celibate vow. This failure on Chitrangada's part to communicate to him her same-sex-nurtured desire is what finally drives the woman to enter a male-centric understanding of erotica in order to redeem her humiliated self-esteem. Pointedly resolving narrative antithesis for the moment, Tagore returns to the epic's story line. He shows that Chitrangada re-decks herself as a seductress with the aid of the male godhead of *eros,* Madan, and therewith succeeds in wresting Arjun away from his dogmatic asceticism.

One piece of dialogue clarifies that Chitrangada's concession to the image of the seductress actually constitutes Tagore's rebuttal to the nationalist ideal of manhood which, in his day, associated male valor with the dual denunciation of flesh

[7] See Chap. 1 in my *Empire, Media, and the Autonomous Woman.* See also Himani Bannerji (74).

and wealth—namely the ideal of the ascetic man capable of *kaminikanchantyag* (renunciation of woman-and/as-gold). We hear a *sakhi* reacting to Chitrangada's rejection by Arjun with a sharp prosaic retort, not sung but spoken. She asserts that the pursuit of celibate *bramhacharya* is a form of masculine arrogance (*spardha*) self-defeating for womankind at large (138). On that note, she supplicates the male god Madan for his mediating hand. Through this mediation, Chitrangada's body is to be reconciled with Hindu masculine codes of beautification: epic, mythic, and contemporary nationalist. Note also that throughout her subsequent erotic alliance with Arjun, Chitrangada is torn between anxiety over her estranged and transient body-beautiful and an abandonment of male-dependent heterosexual desire. Underscoring the objectification in the latter, Chitrangada's self-sacrificial craving for Arjun is imaged as an object to fire up the man's body and gratify his sexual arousal: For her drive is depicted as an incendiary homage or *ahuti* in fire worship at the same time that it is given the attribute of pleasant femininity, sweetness or *madhuri* (141). On his part, Arjun is shown to be basking in the glory (*gaurab*) of recovering his aggressive masculinity (143) until—having grown weary of his self-indulgent private life—he looks again for the vigor of public life (148). It is then that, by his own interest, he seeks the legendary mother-king Chitrangada of whom he has been told.

On that trajectory also, it could well appear that Tagore's seemingly radical imagination is retracting into the nationalist symbol of strong femininity. He is presenting Chitrangada as a national mother, constructed and adulated by the male follower. This reversal to conventional Hindu imagery is further reinforced by a song in which the *sakhis* ask for Arjun to look upon his bride-to-be as his *sevika* or caregiver (153). There is little doubt that these elements of compromise with prevalent nationalist gender imagery encourage us to read the drama's ending in light of Partha Chatterjee's well-known claim about the spatial politics of anti-colonial nationalism. In his view, nationalist practice separated social space into the gendered spheres of the "home and world," vesting the elite woman (*bhadramahila*) with the onus to preserve the "essence" of culture within a home "unaffected by the profane activities of the material world" (238). Similarly, this dance drama's closing appears to be enforcing upon Chitrangada the essential feminine role of the imagined nation's homekeeper and mother. Yet to reduce the work to this *telos* would foreclose the radical challenge *Chitrangada* is posing to all nationalist endeavors for resolving questions of women and heterosexual relations in the interest of a collective identity.

Three imports of the work as a whole are salient in this regard. The piece argues that heterosexual relationships ought to be forged simultaneously at the corporeal (sexual/emotional) and at the active/intellectual level: Woman must be treated with dignity (*sanman*) as the man's companion both at night and in the active daytime (151). At a subtler level, the meaning of dignity itself takes on different nuances. Once we unravel the intratextual and the intertextual politics of the play's closing, as I have been attempting over the previous pages, we cannot but read the emphasis on heterosexual alliance as a conditional one. Tagore's position overall seems to be that in order for this gender-equitable relationship to be achieved, antagonistic gendered alignments of behavior have to be dismantled and rethought.

Then, there is a third import of the closing and indeed of the work as whole. Whereas *Chitrangada* enables the dignity of autonomous self-growth and companionship, as we have seen, it refuses to reduce personal autonomy to atomism. It seems to me that there is a culturally specific point in the collective celebratory performance and accompanying song of spring which ends this dance drama. This group dance wherein Arjun and Chitrangada are joined by the *sakhis* calls for a kinesthetic rejection of companionate relationships between atomistic individuals. The community-enhancing dance also distinguishes this love story from the metropolitan Western romance of the period. Instead, it suggests that the new woman Chitrangada must embody her human dignity by taking a step toward responsible relationality. As a whole, the dance drama clarifies that any responsible engagement with gender relations in society must be worked out not merely in everyday practice, but even more scrupulously in imaginations that otherwise tend to reify bodies and relations and inhibit change. It is not surprising that *Chitrangada* strives for a better heterosexual family-to-be at the core of a national-society-to-come. As such, its message resonates with non-metropolitan feminist cultures which want to rebuild community rather than only confront and subvert male dominance. As bell hooks, African American feminist thinker has argued in another context, feminists who want to imagine change from the grounds of racialized contexts must think of women and men as "comrades in struggle" against multiple structures of domination; the drive, overall, should be for an un-dominated home and community (68–69).

Chitrangada is one of the most noteworthy critical commentaries on the controversial new idea of companionate relationship impinging upon the ideals of the joint patriarchal family in Tagore's Bengal. Its (self-)critique of male dominance and confined womanhood overlaps with other radical narratives Tagore produced in his late humanist phase such as the short story *Streer Patra/Letter from a Wife* (1914). What characterizes these well-known feminist narratives by Tagore, however, is their homogeneous view of caste and social class. On the other hand, we see his critical engagement with masculinist structures and imaginations grow more contradictory, and to that extent less comprehensive, when it gets to portrayals of women located on the fringes of respectable domesticity. Therein upper-caste Hindu prejudices about biological composition intertwined with Social Darwinist notions to produce unstable choreographic and narrative cues—cues which could be interpreted to depict the polluted bodies and culpable inclinations of low-born women. We encounter such cues in the two dance dramas that follow *Chitrangada: Chandalika* (1936), which addresses the desires of an outcaste/*dalit* woman, and *Shyama* (1939), which deals with the flawed loyalty of a court dancer (a public entertainer). However, it is imperative that we note as well that the choreographic and narrative cues presented by the song lyrics of the latter works are intensely conflicted. Their inclination to vilify female bodies goes hand in hand with attacks on idealistic manhood. The challenge to male idealism we find in *Chitrangada*'s Arjun, in these other dance dramas, is deepening into a critique of the idealist's binary eye and its dehumanized other. As I have dealt at length with *Chandalika* in my recent work (105–110), I round out the present discussion with

a word on Tagore's last and in some ways most disturbingly critical portrayal of masculinist idealism, *Shyama.*

Shyama is based on a British interpretation of a Buddhist legend, published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1882 (*RR* 13: 431; "*Granthaparichay*"). Tagore's reading displaces the essentialism in the Orientalist source. Instead, it presents us with a complex ethical quandary juxtaposing desire and culpability with various forms of punitive discipline, blatant and idealized. Shyama the court dancer is depicted as a famous and highly respected beauty who adorns the kingdom of an all-powerful, invisible sovereign. The dance drama version thus dignifies Shyama's appealing body, having transformed her into a respectable icon of feminine grandeur out of the prostituted entertainer we find in the original Buddhist allegory and also in Tagore's own earlier version of the work, the poem *Parishodh* (1899). Despite this moral elevation of the beautiful, the woman is shown to be culpable because of her unrestrained corporeal drives, suggesting a residual bias on the part of the respectable and upper-caste male author. This imagination of flawed femininity, however, is far from monolithic. It is interrelated with and partly overshadowed by various conceptions of disciplinarian masculinity that go hand in hand with the depiction of a woman's struggle for independent desire and free choice. All in all this last of the song-and-dance dramas, composed two years before the author's passing in 1941, presents a deeply unsettled vision of social imagination and power. Tagore's lifelong concern with the sexual grammars governing socially accepted symbols of the pleasing and the good in this work appears to have grown deeply (self-)aware of irreducible contradictions. Reflecting these contradictions, *Shyama*'s song lyrics and rhythmic patterns call for choreographies of incoherent bodies as well as combative movement and gesture languages.

Along these lines, the conceptual and (implied) choreographic relations between Shyama's inclinations and her companions'/*sakhis*' are mutually incoherent. In *Chitrangada,* we encounter a cooperation of desires and movement cues between the princess and her *sakhis*. In contrast to that relatively utopian vision of independent femininity, *Shyama* portrays how tensions surrounding the patriarchal order cause women's groups to fragment. Shyama's companions constitute the voice of social convention trying to mold the decisions of a recalcitrant woman. As her story opens, Shyama is being criticized by her companion dancers as a *garabini* (proud woman) (*RR* 25: 190) who is letting the chance of her lifetime pass her by. Shyama is being upbraided in this manner because she ignores the advances of the only man in her life, devoted young Uttiyo. Invoking the wording and imagery associated with Hindu weddings, the *sakhis* plead with Shyama not to neglect this *param lagan* (ultimate auspicious moment) at which she has encountered a loving man. The threat veiled by the supportive affect of the *sakhis'* song is that unless Shyama seizes this opportunity of securing a husband and hearth brought to her by her desirable youth, the spring of her life will pass her by such that she will have no more (fertile) flowers left with which to string her *baranmala* (wedding garland) (190–191). Yet, these protective warnings by the *sakhis*, which seek to domesticate and socially discipline Shyama's sexuality, are conceived contrapuntally rather than presented as the appropriate *telos* of womanhood. We are

prepared for a clash between personal visions and life goals—and indeed, for a discrepant[8] choreographic design of the *sakhi* scene—foremost by Shyama's articulate disagreement with her companions' assessment of her good fortune. Moreover, an intertextual reading of this scene affirms its irreducibly discrepant elements: Elsewhere, the author himself has valorized rather than vilified the unflinching pride in Shyama's stance.

Diverging from her companions' conventional judgment about her fortunate condition, Shyama retorts that she is deprived of opportunity for self-realization. In the vein of the romantic who wants to exceed stagnant social formations, she seeks the one able to offset many predictable trivialities of her everyday life (pratidin shato tucchyo) and dispel the *bishader kuhelika* (fogs of moroseness) which envelopes her status quo (191): She craves to be initiated into a *nabapranomantra* (motto of new life) enabling her to lose her familiar way (become *pathahara*)—i.e., to claim a form of agency at odds with her secure but confined existence. The import of Shyama's retorts is that her neglect of Uttiyo's advances has less to do with self-love, as implied by the *sakhis* disciplinary allegations, and more with her general lack of freedom to exert choice and discernment.

Moreover, this plea of Shyama's for the woman's freedom of choice in social and sexual matters has intertextual longevity in Tagore's gender thought. More than twenty years prior to writing this dance drama, he had put a similar argument in the mouth of the male protagonist of his novel *Ghare Baire/Home and the World* (1916). It is also noteworthy that in one of the only statements he wrote about his interest in experimenting with song and dance as expressive modes—the letter to Amiya Chakravarty referenced above—Tagore chooses to comment on the song about Shyama the proud one. He suggests that the (sensual) rhythm of this song imparts in us a tendency to reflexively distance ourselves from many proudly beautiful women we see in everyday life. Distanced in this way from the mundane—that is, from the grammars and norms of everyday practice—we learn, according to Tagore, to look upon the beautiful *garabini* with an unencumbered *mugdha* eye (i.e., an eye full of wondrous adoration) (*RR* 25: 434). In his own view of Shyama the *garabini*, in other words, Tagore emphasizes the autonomous dignity of feminine beauty by suggesting that it ought not to be confined within normative practice and imagination. The warning words of Shyama's conventional companions—regarding the auspicious status of the woman's fertile and sexually attractive body—are enough also to remind us that such confining norms of society tend to be constitutively patriarchal. It seems to me that the unscrupulous act Shyama subsequently commits ought to be seen in light of this confinement to which her independent spirit is being subjected.

Once Shyama is attracted toward a handsome foreigner named Bajrasen who is being pursued by the king's guard, her pent-up drive for self-actualization momentarily warps into a ruthlessly self-seeking resolution. To obtain the man she

8 I derive these notions of "contrapuntal" and "discrepant" reading from Edward Said's formulation. See his *Culture and Imperialism.*

desires, Shyama tacitly allows her devoted follower Uttiyo to admit to the charge against the foreigner and secure Bajrasen's release by giving himself up. Despite her last-minute remorse, Shyama's frantic intervention fails to save Uttiyo from the executioner's block. Yet, this apparently heinous act neither is singled out for criminalization nor is its perpetrator unilaterally vilified. Instead, the culpability of this strong-willed woman is placed in relation to a masculinist territory criss-crossed by a variety of disciplinarian and punitive men.

One embodiment of the territorial mentality is to be found in the combative agent of an irrational authority figure. Through song lyrics and stage directions—suggestive of hurtling movements, random pursuits, and deathly blows—the King's Police Chief and retinue of guards present dark caricatures of feudal law keeping. They act out the arbitrary rules of an all-powerful possessor of treasures and bodies, which include not only jewels in the coffer but also the adorning body of the courtly beauty Shyama. To keep up the appearance that he guards the King's valued possessions against all forms of loss (*kshati*) (199)—and to save his own skin—the Police Chief randomly victimizes and punishes innocent people. It is in this way that the foreign jewel trader Bajrasen has been hunted down in the first place. Hence, Shyama's endeavor to save the innocent victim Bajrasen, while momentarily mired in unscrupulous self-interest, cannot be seen other than in relation to this landscape of irrational discipline, victim age, and underlying possessiveness. What at first appears to stand out against these unregulated affects of terror and guilt, on the other hand, is the scrupulous rationality in Bajrasen's own rhetoric. Thus, in the Bajrasen who has been radically transformed into Shyama's harshest judge—the one who categorically criminalizes her both through verbal and implied movement language—we meet Tagore's (self-)critique of masculine territoriality at its most despondent.

From the first moment of appearance, Bajrasen strikes a chord at odds with prevalent attitudes of possessiveness and control. Even though a tradesman by profession, he imperils his status in the new land by refusing to sell to the Queen a bejeweled necklace upon which she has cast her eye. Instead, he chooses to retain the priceless ornament he has acquired for the ideal woman he hopes to meet. Early in the dramatic action, Bajrasen is thus established as something of a (modern) rational man able to (self-)critique the acquisitive and instrumental norms of his everyday life. It is hardly surprising, then, that after he is released from imprisonment through the agency of the spectacular beauty, Shyama, he should couch his feelings for her in thoroughly idealistic terms. Upon detecting in her demeanor a sense of guilt and culpability—without yet knowing the cause—Bajrasen wants to dispel her anxieties with one stroke of his philosophical logic. He reminds Shyama of the self-overflowing character of *prem*—a philosophy of love deriving from the tradition of *bhava* aesthetics (Mohanty 70; Dimock et al. 226) and eschewing the control of the other (body, nature) propounded by Cartesian liberal thought. Bajrasen maintains that because *prem* is *chirarini* (eternally indebted) for its own overflowing joyousness (*apanari harashe*), it fulfills its debt of bliss through forgiving all wrongdoings and crimes (*sab pap kshama kari reenshodh karey she*) (198). Once Shyama exposes the cause of her guilt, on the other hand,

Bajrasen's idealization of boundary-surpassing love instantly transforms into an acute loathing for the essential *kaloosh* (defilement) in this woman as his other. Indispensable to any choreography of *Shyama*, in fact, is this clash of gendered body postures, with the man in all his punitive muscularity towering over a feminized cringing body—a body made vulnerable to his attacks due to the conflicting messages he sends.

For the tragic irony of Bajrasen's idealism is his vacillation in these final scenes. We see him oscillate between craving the virtuously beautiful Shyama of his imagination—at once fetishized as a property and reclaimed with forgiveness—and alienating the other Shyama who has been contaminated, in his eye, by vile desire. Having driven her from him, Bajrasen recalls in his nostalgic imagination her *madhurisudha* (nectar of pleasant sweetness) at the same time that he is clinging with fetishistic ardor to an anklet she left behind (203). As soon as Shyama returns in response to his beckoning, Bajrasen reverts to vicious abuse, rejecting the quintessence of vileness he finds in her presence. In this last and bleakest exploration of the struggles of womanly desire within the confines of male control, then, Tagore has relentlessly unraveled the vicissitudes of masculinist *kalpana* as found in his worldly context: He has shown that imagination remains masculinist so long as it is in search of the *utkarsha/*essence of femininity. All in all, these women-centered, late works by Tagore have sought to explore and expose how the idealist quest for essence imprisons imagination, reiforcing attitudes of imperial and nationalist dominance over a feminized (potentially deviant) other.

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Chapter 13
“As Though She Were a Man”: *Chitrangada* and Contemporary Queer Appropriations of Tagore

Sumanyu Satpathy

Abstract What encourages a blogger to connect photographs of pairs of same-sex lovers from the late nineteenth century with texts from entirely different contexts such as poetry, fiction, letters, and lyrics to narrate what, according to the blogger, the couples might be saying, doing, and feeling? What makes a queer film director–actor use Tagore’s apparently innocuous dance drama Chitrangada as a major prop for his film to reinterpret the play in terms of gender identity, as a means of understanding his own self as well as the character he is playing? This chapter attempts to examine how irrespective of the original intentions of Tagore, latter-day gay spectators and readers misread, sometimes deliberately, Tagore’s texts. In the chapter, the author uses the idea of the “fantasmatic spectator” (as enunciated by Brett Farmer) for discussing the queer reception of a few Tagore texts, mostly focusing on Rituparno Ghosh’s reinterpretation and resituating of Chitrangada.

Keywords Queer theory · Gender studies · Film studies · Fantasmatic spectator · Theater · Literary theory · Chitrangada

Some years ago, I attended a queer conference at Bangkok where, due to fund restrictions, a fellow academic (a young male) and I had to share a room for the duration of the event. Apart from 3 or 4 of us, the rest of the 100-odd cast of characters drawn from all over the world fitted the description “queer” by virtue of beings gays, lesbians, transvestites, transgender, *hijra*, and so on. A few hours into the conference and the two of us began to be showcased as practitioners of some Indian version of pederasty, a university professor and his young gay partner-disciple from a predominantly homophobic India! Needless to say, during the day we would pretend that we were, and bask in the looks of admiration from all and sundry, and would laugh on return to our room where we seldom found any time or inclination to be friendly, let alone being “gay.” Each of us found time to go to the notorious haunts of heterosexual pleasure finding

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little use for the packets of condom that our seminar bags contained, among other things, such as addresses for gay or lesbian sex shows, massage parlors. What was I, a happily married family person, doing at an event like that? Why have I been engaged in scholarship and research in an area where my subject position demands no academic activism? Unlike in the West, in India, happily, this is more often the case, that a straight or an upper caste Brahmin can be unquestioningly accepted as a queer or dalit scholar. Yet, I have willingly embraced the category, a "straight ally" coined by Colleen Lamos.[1] However, this is not the point I was trying to make while recounting the anecdote above, which rather is that homoerotically inclined subjects can and do "misread" signs pertaining to the heteronormative world around them in order to derive pleasures and seek out a larger body of affective community; also, in so doing, creative artists and critics extend the range of aesthetic possibilities. This may be because they are forced to spectate an overabundance of dominant cultural productions that are "different" from their own sexual proclivities. After all, until recently, the range of choices the queer subjects have had for entertainment on the popular electronic and print media and cinema, etc., has been extremely limited, and they have had to dip into the underground for queer art, that is not always of unquestionable merit, for succor. In the sphere of literature, similarly, it has been only a couple of decades since discussions of queer elements in established and celebrated authors such as Shakespeare, Whitman, Forster, Virginia Woolf, Auden, and so on has gained ground, but these are mostly writers from the West. For Indians with a queer orientation or for queer people with an orientalist bias, India does not afford many gay or lesbian icons or iconic texts: One reason why dissident critics in India are often seen as overinterpreting traditional texts either by critics and reviewers with a right-wing bias or simply by straight critics.

In this context, it might be salutary to look at the gay reception of India's preeminent poet, Rabindranath Tagore. Though Indian admirers of Tagore are generally homophobic, queer interpretations of the man and his work are not entirely unknown. I have no intentions whatsoever of adding to the meager corpus of the queer Tagore; rather, in what follows, I shall examine, especially citing the instance of his *Chitrangada*, how irrespective of the original intentions of Tagore, latter-day gay readers and spectators have attempted to appropriate and read his poetry and plays in ways that the mainstream audience might find offensive.

13.1 I

To begin with, I accidentally came across one such gay appropriation on a blog (where else?) maintained by an American blogger, Kenneth Hill who juxtaposes sepia photographs of pairs of same-sex lovers from the late nineteenth century with literary texts from entirely different contexts to narrate what, according to him, the couples might be saying, doing, and feeling, with the note: "Photographer, sitters, unknown" (Hill 2013).These pieces are from confirmed gay or gay-friendly, lesbian writers/poets/artists such as C.P. Cavafy and Pushkin as well as from non-homoerotic writers and poets such as Dickens. Hill justifies his enterprise with the following note: "Assembling these Imagined Histories creates a gay ancestry of sorts that I have

[1] Lamos uses the term in "The Ethics of Queer Theory" (1999: 141–150).

always longed to know—*even if I have had to make it up myself*. This is the lineage I wish had been passed down to me like so much treasure, like other cultures do to honor a common identity" (ibid: my emphasis). I did not find anything surprising about his exhibits except when I encountered there one of Tagore's poems, "Unending Love" in William Radice's translation, excerpts from which I quote below:

> I seem to have loved you in numberless forms, numberless times
> In life after life, in age after age, forever.
> My spellbound heart has made and remade the necklace of songs,
> That you take as a gift, wear round your neck in your many forms,
> In life after life, in age after age, forever.
> …. (ibid.)

Taken somewhat aback by this exhibit, I quickly tried to guess what may have encouraged Hill to "read" these lines as expression of homoerotic love is the incidence of gender-neutral pronouns such as "you" and "I." Also, references to "universal love" echoing Auden's valorization of the vision and feast of Agape, and the deployment of Whitmanesque rhetoric about "[t]he love of all man's days both past and forever" as well as of phrases like "numberless forms" make it easy for the blogger to relocate the lines in a homoerotic ambience. If they had been given a different context, such as the sepia photograph of a man and woman in a similar posture, the same lines would have been read as part of the tradition of the heterosexual love lyric. Obviously, visual repositioning of a written/printed text involves a certain degree of semiotic figuration and reconfiguration.

But, to anyone familiar with Tagore's intellectual growth, the lines would appear not as poetic assertions of any queer identity; rather, they would be perceived as belonging to the intertwining traditions stretching back to the Upanishadic teachings through the medieval Bhakti[2] to the rural folk traditions of

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[2] Bhakti is a medieval movement in Indian culture. A.K. Ramanujan discusses the Kannada movement of Bhakti. Here, for example, is the Vachana poet, Dasimayya:

> If they see
> breasts and long hair coming
> they call it woman,
> if beard and whiskers
> they call it man:
> but, look, the self that hovers
> in between
> is neither man
> nor woman
> O Rimanitha!
> (Ramanujan 1978: 27) And, here is Vasavanna:
> Look here, dear fellow:
> I wear these men's clothes
> only for you.
> Sometimes I am man.
> Sometimes I am woman.
> O lord of the meeting rivers
> I'll make wars for you
> but I'll be your devotees' bride.
> (ibid. 29)

It is a peculiar irony that the advent of colonial modernity made Indian readers and believers homophobic denying fluidity of gender identity in the face of traditions such as Bhakti and Vachana poets.

the Baul[3] that Tagore knew only too well including Kabir's dohas[4] which he had co-translated with the American mystic poet, Evelyn Underhill. For example, Tagore's debt to the Maithili poet, Vidyapati,[5] is well known. One of Vidyapati's verses is well worth quoting here:

> All my inhibition left me in a flash,
> When he robbed me of my clothes,
> But his body became my new dress.
> Like a bee hovering on a lotus leaf
> He was there in my night, on me!
> (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vidyapati)

Here, Vidyapati's graphic description not withstanding, the traditional semiotic would insist that the poet's bhaktic persona assumes the garb of Radha and imagines being embraced by Krishna. But Vidyapati's is not the only instance: In his *The Religion of Man,* Tagore quotes several other poet-saints of medieval India who help in our understanding and placing Tagore's views on the subject. Tagore may have been aware of the then newly emergent sexological discourses engaging in conflicting views about "inversion," "third sex"; but instead of invoking these, he chooses to highlight and work within the indigenous traditions.

Recently, J. Edgar Bauer has put these traditional instances to slightly different use. Offering readings that were totally secular, he says in his article that their "ecstatic homoeroticism can hardly be overlooked" (Bauer 2010: 456). Further, referring to Tagore's quotation from one of them, he comments how one of the bhaktic poet–saints exclaims without subterfuge: "Thou seest me, O Divine Man (*narahari*), and I see thee, and our love becomes mutual." (ibid). This queer critic refers to another of Tagore's quotation from a Baul: "Man seeks the man in me and I lose myself and run out." (ibid). Soon Bauer takes over and goes on to pile quotation upon quotation from more of the poet saints including Kabir:

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[3] Baul is a mystical, Vaishnava tradition that combines with it the Muslim Sufi tradition of devotion. It is also a musical tradition of a particular kind. Tagore was deeply influenced by this tradition.

[4] Kabir was a fifteenth century saint poet of North India, largely known for his oral poetry, where he criticized the evil practices prevalent in both contemporary Hinduism and Islam. His oral poetry, which had an overt reformist message, was produced as *doha,* which is the couplet form in verse, in the written composition. Doha is a type of couplet composed in verse, which rhyme together. A poet like Kabir whose poetry is often associated with this form, being unaware of alphabet, never wrote anything in his lifetime. This form was chosen by his followers when they decided to commit his oral poetry into written form.

[5] Maithili is a language with its own rich literary tradition which dates back to fourteenth century and has its own script known as Mithilakshar, spoken in Mithila, the northeastern region of Bihar and some parts of Nepal. It is often misunderstood as a dialect of Hindi. Vidyapati Thakkura was a fifteenth century poet of Mithila, who composed in both Sanskrit and in Maithili, but is popularly known for his Maithili love songs about Radha and Krishna. Grierson was the first colonial administrator to collect and publish some of the popular songs of Vidyapati in late nineteenth century.

> Kabir utters his unconditional surrender as *wife* to the exalted male Beloved: "I meet my husband, and leave at His feet the offering of my body and my mind." More importantly, Kabir reasserts his rapturous sex-crossing when acknowledging the shortcomings of "her" bridal love: "When people say I am Thy bride, I am ashamed; for I have not touched Thy heart with my heart" (ibid. 457).

Bauer, it seems, gets carried away by his "discovery," and wonders why Tagore does not do enough to articulate what appears to be obvious to the modern reader. Obviously, apart from his propensity to secularize Indian mysticism, Bauer is looking for evidence in English translation of all these lines in order to be able to isolate strands of homoeroticism, without realizing that in their original context and language register the semantic structures are different. For example, in the first quote given above from the Baul mystic, man is generic rather than a gendered subject. But in English translation, it sounds conveniently homoerotic.

Similarly, even in his own time, Tagore's views and Whitmanesque deportment had prompted certain Western intellectuals to see similarities between Tagore's views and their own on human sexuality as was then emergent. For instance, Magnus Hirschfeld [(1868–1935), a well-known sexologist, who had met and recorded his conversations with Tagore], read in Tagore's public persona certain "feminine" features; and gleefully reproduces observations by a teacher (who may have himself imbibed Western values) at Santiniketan to the effect that Tagore resembled a *prima donna*. Here again, Bauer deals with the views of Hirschfeld at some length and is surprised how Tagore does not extend some of his own ideas regarding the continuum of creation to the sphere of human sexual binary (Bauer 2010: 455–456). This puzzlement on the part of Bauer may have been caused by his inability to grasp the indigenous tradition within which Tagore was meditating both in his discursive, philosophical prose as well as his poetry and plays. What Bauer seems to be missing out on is the pervasive evidence in Tagore of the immaterial, mystical self, the inner–outer binary, the inner essence, and outer garment of gender identity entrenched in Hindu mysticism. Finding Tagore's mysticism too elusive, Bauer, the queer critic, tries to construct and "imagine a history" where he would have liked to place Tagore, very much like Hill does.

It is in the performative aspect of Tagore's art, however, that one is faced with more complex issues. For, from reading a printed text to spectating a performative one, the process of cultural translation might interfere with questions of intersubjectivity. Though in his poetry Tagore successfully elides issues related to the materiality of the body, whether male or female, and shrouds his lines in impenetrable mysticism, in his dramatic art, because of its very performative nature, he meets with serious challenge. His play, *Chitrangada* (1935), is a case in point: when the *dance* drama is performed on stage, the body's materiality cannot be elided even though Tagore deploys metaphors for external, bodily endowment as clothing, as also through the semiotic of costume and body language, even though such symbols and imageries are not as pervasive as those in his *poetic* drama. Thus, any sensitive and intelligent choreographer who attempts to stage Tagore's dance drama will have to contend with several questions about costume, choice of actors with certain kinds of bodily features and their body

language arising out of the contradictions between the visual-semantic and the thematic-epistemologic. It is not only necessary for us to see how Tagore has interpreted the apparently innocuous Chitrangada episode from the Indian epic in revolutionary ways, but it might also prove to be a revelation in the context of the point I am trying to make, if we examine how his own representations of human sexuality and gender have inseminated fertile minds and helped proliferate even more radical representations.

That the Chitrangada episode from the Sanskrit epic held much significance for Tagore there is no doubt, since he returned to it again and again: Having first composed a poetic play *Chitrangada* (1892), he supervised its translation (if he did not translate it himself) into English as *Chitra* for the English stage with elaborate stage instructions. Then he got it published as *Chitra* (1914) without the stage directions, finally reworking it into a dance drama in 1935. Why is Tagore interested, almost obsessed with the episode so as to inflect it to almost an unacceptable level of irreverence? What does he do with it that prompts a queer film maker like Rituparno Ghosh, more than a hundred years later, to reprise Tagore's play through his film, *Chitrangada*: *The Crowning Wish*, and in such a way as to give it a major queer twist and nearly unacceptable to an average Tagore fan? A large part of my paper is preoccupied with these and similar questions.

As an aside, one might note that such adventurous reinvention on Tagore's part was made possible partly because the Chitrangada episode is embedded in the scriptural text of the *Mahabharata* and may be said to have been imbued in "cult value."[6] When Tagore reinvents it on the modern stage, it is as yet unaided by technology, and its cult value ought to be intact. This enables Tagore to exploit, and subtly modernize the narrative. But, in the process, Arjuna and Chitrangada's father no longer remain the focal point but are retrenched to the background diminishing the cult value. There is a parallel between Hill's effort to the cult of remembrance by using nineteenth century photographs and excerpts from canonical literary pieces, that even when secularization of cult is in process, through technology, an attempt is being made to retain the cult value.

Just as Tagore was poised in the cusp of modernity, Ghosh's context is that of the globalized, postmodern epistemic moment. Ghosh lives at a time when Indian cinema has already fought its first battles with its homophobic audience from *Fire* and *Girlfriend* onward. Though neither of the two films is free from essentialism and sexual stereotypes, they pave the way for a more open discussion of queer identity the representation of which continues to grow in mainstream Hindi cinema. Thus, when Ghosh falls back on the cult value of the episode, he can afford to dispense with the cushion of the *Mahabharata*, and go straight to Tagore's dance drama, *Chitrangada*. In spite of this denial of sacrality to Ghosh's text, the cult value derives by way of Tagore's own iconic status, even as it (cult value) relocates itself from the sacral to the secular context.

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[6] Walter Benjamin (1968) offers a detailed analysis of this phenomenon in his cult classic, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

13.2 II

Vyasa's narrative runs thus: In the Arjuna-*vanavasa* section of *Adiparva*, Arjuna crosses the country of Kalinga and goes to Manipura, where he meets Chitrangada, the daughter of Chitravahana, the ruler of Manipura. He desires to possess her and requests the king for her hand. After satisfying himself about Arjuna's lineage, he gives the background to her birth and his future plans for her. He says, "there was in our race a king of the name of Prabhanjana, who was childless….[after he performed severe penance, Mahadeva] granted him the boon that each successive descendant of his race should have one child only. In consequence of that boon … [a]ll my ancestors … had each a male child. I, however, have only a daughter to perpetuate my race." (Ganguli 1998: 421) Then, follow the crucial lines:

> *Ekacha mama kanyeyamkuloshyutpadinibhrusam*
> *Putromamayemiti mebhavanapurusharshava*
> *Putrikahetubidhinasangitabharatarshva*
> *tatmadekahsutojoshyamjayatebharatashyoya*

The passage has been paraphrased by Ganguly as follows: Chitravahana says: "But, o bull amongst men, I ever look upon this daughter of mine as my son. O bull of Bharata's race, I have duly made her a *Putrika*." In another edition (Gita Press 1989), the annotations are somewhat different, though here too the cryptic Chitrangada section (ch. 214 verses 14–27) is silent about her upbringing. Far from being "manly" in any way, she is portrayed as a beautiful woman right from when (and as) first seen by Arjuna. The two adjectives used to describe her are: "*charudarshana*" (14) and "bararoha" (15), good-looking, and curvaceous, i.e., well-proportioned, in particular with beautiful waist and hips. She is just taken to be (not even treated like) a son by Chitravahana; she does not look in any way like a son. As the king puts it, it is his "*bhavana,*" i.e., fancy, that she is his "*putra*." The "*putrika*" line, which is held up by many as a gender-neutral term for a child, follows immediately after and runs as follows: "*putrikahetubidhina-samjita bharatarsava*" i.e., O Arjuna, she is named/called by me *putrika* by *hetu-vidhi*. "*Hetuvidhi*" which Professor Harish Trivedi explains in a personal e-mail to the present author as "may be a technical term; literally, it means 'for a reason.' This reason, explained parenthetically in the Gita Press ed., is '(i.e., for the reason that her first son will be regarded/recognized as my own son)'—in terms of succession to the throne." Chitravahana eventually agrees to give away his daughter to Arjuna with the proviso that after the son is born to them, he would leave both his wife and son behind and leave Manipura. Arjuna duly agrees and fulfills his promise subsequently.

Thus, the manly aspect and the boon that transforms Chitrangada into a lovely ultra-feminine beauty seem to be entirely the creation of Tagore. Whereas in the *Mahabharata*, the boon from Shiva was for a sole child ("*pradadekyekamprasa-beykule*," i.e., progenetate one each, with gender-neutral overtones) for each of the descendants, and a son was born to successive kings, Tagore changes the plot significantly and consciously so that "Lord Shiva promised to [her] royal grandsires an

unbroken line of male descent." (*Chitra*: 2) but even this divine word "proved powerless to change the spark of life in [her] mother's womb—so invincible was my nature, woman though I be." (ibid. 2–3) Tagore, after giving deft touches of signifiers for musculinity at crucial junctures, turns to the traditional Hindu view of *maya*: reality as illusion. "Alas, that this frail disguise, the body, should make one blind to the deathless spirit!" (ibid. 18). Arjuna realizes this much later, almost at the end of the one year of feminine beauty granted to Chitra: "Illusion is the first appearance of Truth." Then she advances towards her lover in disguise. But a time comes when she throws off her ornaments and veils and stands clothed in naked dignity." "I grope for that ultimate you, that bare simplicity of truth." (ibid. 52) In a way, Tagore here seems to be influenced by the following lines from the Gita:

vasamsijirnaniyathavihaya
navanigrhnatinaro 'parani
tathasariranivihayajirnany
anyanisamyatinavanidehi
(Chap. 2)

(As a person puts on new garments,giving up old ones, similarly, the soul accepts new material bodies, giving up the old and useless ones.)

To my mind, Tagore simply exploits the aporetic moment in the original episode, and he (or his as yet unknown source)[7] interprets the terms *Santana* and *putrika* (used instead of *putra* along with the difficult, *hetubidhina*) as male child to suit his need and provides for a potential queer reading of the transformation. The only known account of the play's genesis is Tagore's own. In 1940, Tagore recalls his experience of a train journey of many years ago from Santiniketan to Kolkata when certain thoughts occurred to him and it was then that he remembered and recalled the Chitrangada episode: "the episode, having taken different forms (he uses the term *rupantar*), had been playing in my mind." He clearly states that his intention was to pit "strength of character against external beauty," human value against natural value "*Suchana*" (*Rabindra Rachanabali* 1940). But, of course, in his rendering, he does more than that as he delves deep into questions of masculinity and femininity often blurring the boundaries between the two, and insists on the essential core of humanness, the generic man or human rather than the manly man. My point, however, is that this strategic recasting by Tagore of the characters generates a kind of sexual polyvalence in the text that subsequent queer readers and spectators seem to having felt tempted to exploit befitting their disposition.

Within the radical recasting of the tropes, however, in all his versions, Tagore portrays the original and metamorphosed Chitrangada most stereotypically: She is first manly and, therefore, *kurupa* (or ugly). She is brought up as a "man" of the warrior

[7] I have checked versions of the *Mahabharata*, including the Bengali version by Kashi Das, for this episode, and there seems to be no precedent to the innovations we notice in Tagore. It is impossible to ascertain whether there had been newer versions in folk yatras or Baul songs that Tagore knew.

caste. She is also shown as failing to court Arjuna because of her manly features, even when she puts on women's garb. In fact, when she later recounts her encounter with Arjuna, she describes herself as having behaved shamelessly "as though she were a man" (*Chitra* 56-5); for a woman with *lajja*, a *bhadramahila* (De 2011: 142), would not make the first overture to a man (which could be Tagore's half wink to his contemporary audience). Chitrangada is further represented in terms of the then existing stereotype of a beautiful woman when she is metamorphosed by Madana into a "feminine"—and therefore exquisitely beautiful—woman. There is hardly any difference between the first version of 1892 and the 1935 version in Tagore's emphasis on the masculine–feminine binary, and suggesting some sort of androgyny as an ideal. In the first, the stereotype of the woman as *abala* (bereft of strength) or the weaker sex appears again and again: "I know no feminine wiles for winning hearts. My hands are strong to bend the bow…" (Tagore 1914: 3). After being ignored by Arjuna, she lays aside her "man's clothing…the unaccustomed dress clung about my shrinking shame…" (ibid. 6). In the dance drama version too Tagore brings it up: in both, the attempt continues to be the valorization of the inner, essential self and the neglect of the outer cover of illusion of the body. "Alas, I have failed the woman in me/thus far in my life/shame to the bow and arrow/shame to my strong arms" (my translation).

In the original version as depicted in the *Mahabharata*, the coercive transaction over Chitrangada's body is between two dominant males: the father and the would-be husband, completely denying any agency to the woman. Tagore turns this on its head, and accords marginal agency to Arjuna and none to her father, who is not even a character in any of the versions. She desires Arjuna; it is she who arouses Arjuna's desire for her, and it is on her terms and conditions and not her father's that she agrees to accept him. Noteworthy are the series of imperative verbs that Chitrangada uses in her dialogues with Arjuna.

13.3 III

Generations of theater directors have given various interpretations of the earlier and later Chitrangada by gendering her vis-à-vis Arjuna and her *sakhi*s. These interpretations are iterated and visibilized through costume, or as in the case of Arjuna, through a muscular body with or without facial hair, mustache, etc.; and, accordingly, they have asked their actors to use appropriate body language and dance forms. Whereas, in most productions, then and even now, the heterosexual audience's titillatory expectations are kept alive, in minimalist sartorial makeup of the female actor as the manly Chitrangada, by merely adorning her with a man's headgear and, her prominent body language is used to iterate female sexuality through a kind of *faux* simulacra.

While, in a heterosexual environment such violation of theatrical *auchitya* or propriety is accepted without protest, a queer, phantasmatic spectator might respond differently. One can see an example of this when a queer auteur like Rituparno Ghosh critiques such performative malappropriation in the dance drama within his film, *Chitrangada*. Ghosh's reprisal of *Chitrangada* by way of

contemporanising it with a sharp dose of intertextuality sees a queer twist in the tale he receives from his idol, Tagore. Even more significantly, Ghosh, who is himself a cross-dressing male in real life, plays the role of Rudra, the choreographer in the film. While rehearsing the opening scene (within the frame narrative) where Chitrangada and her friends are shown capturing Arjuna, the bare-chested actor playing Arjuna is revealed as a young man with long hair and a six-pack body, and the actor playing the role of Chitrangada (Kasturi) as the "manly" princess. The hyperreal Ghosh/Rudra so deeply identifies with the character of Tagore's heroine that he is upset with the actor playing Chitrangada, because she acts too dainty to be mistaken for a man by Arjuna or even the spectators. First, he yells at the actor, "not so dainty." Failing to drive home the point, in a moment of black humor, he then accuses Kasturi of expressing the body language of a Radha playing Holi instead of behaving like a manly princess: as if in answer to D.L. Roy's attack (1916) on Tagore's depiction of the princess as "a prostitute-like profligate woman self-indulging with her lover Arjun and therewith desecrating the virtuous chastity of daughter and wife depicted by the original epic" (quoted by De: 139).

Ghosh/Rudra goes on to explain Tagore's purpose by saying that Chitrangada was conditioned to be a man by her father, and so her body language needed to be shown to be that of a man. "It was only when she saw Arjuna that she wished to be a woman." Ghosh/Rudra goes on to declaim that the story of Chitrangada is about desire: "*aur baabar icche versus aur icche*" (i.e., "her wish versus her father's wish") "*Chitrangada ekta iccher golpo*," ("Chitrangada is the story of a wish") that "you can choose your gender." For Ghosh/Rudra, this is *the* queer moment in Tagore that he sets out to unpack in his film. For us, this is *the* queer spectatorial phantasma that Ghosh/Rudra's queer subjectivity gazes and seizes upon. Self-reflexive to the hilt, the film even introduces a scene where a laudatory review of the dance drama speaks of the novelty in the production. Later, of course, Rudra's own experiences in life convince him that he had failed to do justice to Tagore's Chitrangada, leading him to admit to Subho that he had not understood the character fully and, by implication, is critical of the ending of Tagore's dance drama.

13.4 IV

So far in our discussion, we notice the imbrication of issues of performativity and spectatorship. I shall now deploy Brett Farmer's formulation of the "fantasmatic spectator,"[8] by which he tries to

> …demonstrate how gay spectators can engage in queer fantasmatic negotiations of mainstream film. [He] suggest[s] that, in their readings of the Hollywood musical, gay spectators latch on to those points of rupture or excess to which the musical is so spectacularly prone and mobilize them to construct patently queer forms of fantasmatic desire.
>
> (Farmer 2000: 17)

[8] I borrow this from Brett Farmer's *Spectacular Passions* (2000).

While analyzing a few of the early movies to illustrate his point, he takes up a few plays which were turned into screenplays in the 1940s such as *The Pirate*, originally clearly fitting into the heteronormative format of early cinema. Originally written as a play, it was turned into a screenplay for the musical, which is how it becomes famous, especially among the gay spectators; and, as discussed by Farmer, Judy Garland becomes a gay icon. The gay blogger Kenneth Hill too talks about how his "reading a biography of Judy Garland in 1974 at the age of twelve" outed him (Hill 2009). Looking at the reasons why the movie and its heroine become gay icons, Farmer cites certain features of the movie such as its opulence (a characteristic feature of the director), the real-life image of the main character Judy Garland, and the then prevailing homophobia-enforced public–private existence of gays.

Like *The Pirate* and other contemporary musicals, Tagore's dance drama too can be seen as a theatrical "musical" in the sense that the story is put to music with the characters acting out their parts through dance. It also enables a kind of visualization on stage, but with the difference that the spectator's perceptions are not aided by the technology of the movie camera. The naked eye is all that he/she uses. But traditionally, the play is enacted through various forms of dance such as Manipuri and Odissi where the *mudra*s of the hand and eyes constitute the principal elements of body language which add to the textual language of the original author. This semiotic of the stage enables the director of the play to read and interpret it in certain ways that is not available to the reader of the printed text. What is true of films applies no less to the visualizing of printed texts.

Recently, in answer to a question by Shohini Ghosh, Rituparno Ghosh says that he identifies with Binodini of Tagore's *Chokher Bali*, which he had directed. The film ostensibly has nothing to do with the question of homosexuality, but even here the principle of phantasmatic spectator is equally applicable.[9] For Ghosh says,

> I identify with parts of all my films, but if I had to choose a character that was closest to my heart, it would be Binodini, played by Aishwarya Rai in *Chokher Bali*, because she stands on the threshold of transformation. Binodini becomes a widow when widow remarriage has been legislated (by the British) but has yet to find social acceptance. There is tragic isolation in being caught in the half-light of legitimacy. I feel a strong sense of identification with that.
>
> (R. Ghosh 2012c)

Ritupano Ghosh did not have to try hard to identify with Chitrangada. When his film, *Chitrangada* begins, with a heavily drugged Rudra half way through his gender correction surgery, he tells the story of Chitrangada to Subho, a product of his hallucinated imagination. Soon, Rudra's hallucinatory interlocutor questions Rudra's production of Tagore's play by asking him "Will it not be too autobiographical"? To this, Rudra/Ghosh replies: "It is because you know me." Yet, a few

[9] Shohini Ghosh, a queer critic herself, looks at another text by Tagore, *Streer Patra* (*The Wife's Letter*) especially, the film version by Purnendu Patrea (1976) in the same way (S. Ghosh 2012).

scenes later, Subho is so taken aback by Rudra's radical reprisal of the play within the film that he asks him, "*Eita je Tagorer Chitrangada seta ki bojha jabe*?" (Will it be possible to recognize this as Tagore's *Chitrangada*?"). Rudra/Ghosh's identification with Chitrangada was easy because, no matter what were Tagore's stated or implicit intentions, certain dialogues and the form of *Chitrangada* seem overdetermined by elements of sexual dissidence. These elements in Tagore's play start appearing in quick succession as Arjuna becomes increasingly curious about the identity of Chitrangada upon hearing details from the villagers: "In affection," he was told, "she is mother, in armed might she is king"; and "in bravery she is manly/…on throne she is a lion-rider."[10] The best examples of the queer potentiality of the Tagore text can be culled from the scenes where the *sakhi*s are surprised by the "unnatural" longing of Arjuna for the manly Chitrangada. They ask Arjuna pointedly whether he was already weary of womanly temptations and has now started indulging in absurd longing, looking for "a man in woman?" (Tagore 2013: 108–109).

However, unlike Chitrangada, Rudra is born male. Unlike Chitrangada who is raised as a woman, and assumes manly features, Rudra's parents want him to go for counseling to cure his effeminacy and save them social embarrassment. The major invention, however, is that of Rudra's love interest for the male percussionist in his drama group, heroin addict, Partho—another name for Arjuna, and happily, a common Bengali name; the allegorization and contemporization of the Chitrangada episode could hardly be more obvious. To drive home the allegory, Ghosh weaves scenes and lines from the play into the fabric of the screenplay. After having aroused the female passion in Rudra, and holding out hope for companionship, the relationship goes awry. When Subho asks him later why he should be in love with Partho, a heroin addict, he says that it is precisely because of that reason. After all, Partho is also ostracized by the society. Thus, very much like Judy Garland's escapades providing the gay spectators of *The Pirate* with an image of their own dissidence, Rudra sees in Partho's drug addiction, images of his own ostracization within the heteronormative regime.

However, Subho's misgivings notwithstanding, the allegorical resonances are never a far cry, in terms of exact parallels or major discrepancies. For, the two fathers, Chitrangada's and Rudra's, wanted their child to fulfill their wish for inheritance. Though both in the epic and Tagore's play the mother of Chitrangada is invisible, in Rituparno Ghosh, Rudra's mother plays a crucial and sympathetic role and helps her gay son "come out." The transformation of Chitrangada in Tagore's play takes recourse to Ovidian narrative techniques,[11] so that the supernatural Kamadev brings about the metamorphoses; but in Ghosh's film, the plastic surgeon is responsible for Rudra's bodily transformations. Thus, Chitrangada's

[10] An allusion to Goddess Durga, the annihilator of the evil demon, Mahisasura.

[11] Though physical transformation through supernatural intervention is not unknown in Indian mythology and folk narratives, I call such transformation in the context of Tagore "Ovidian" because such metamorphosis is central to all of Ovid's tales as is the case with Tagore's text.

ambisexual body in Tagore becomes a palimpsest where Ghosh overwrites a completely unambiguous queer text.

The allegorical plot in the screenplay takes an entirely different course from the original plot of Tagore's Chitrangada when Partho deserts Rudra because the latter cannot give him a child. Rudra receives a rude shock with the discovery of the materiality of his body, and yet at another level its immateriality. He almost expresses a Tagorean interpretation of the body, that of the illusion of the bodily reality. When he is asked by his father to sign bank papers saying that he has no claims to the property by virtue of not being a son, Rudra says, "Have I now ceased to be the person who was your child. Have I disappeared just because I have undergone surgery?" The imagery of clothing and ornamentation is pervasive whenever Chitrangada talks about bedecking herself or, and even more so, when Rituparno Ghosh focuses on Rudra's bodily changes for Ghosh too interprets Tagore's Chitrangada in terms of bodily deceit and the triumph of the "plain truth."

The cultural conditioning of the dance form as "feminine" too helps Ghosh in his interpretation as Rudra frequently expresses his emotions through the dance moves and hand–body language. Rudra's parents, especially the father, are aghast that their son has opted for the feminine career as a dancer. But it is to Partho that he explains this: "My art is not gender bound. Neither is my identity." In an interview, Ghosh says, "That's where Anjan asks me how I would like to be remembered—as an artist or as *surupa*. At that moment, I realize that I don't need a woman's body to realize my feminine desires. Because the body is not about physical boundaries, it is about the relationship between me and the person perceiving it." (R. Ghosh 2012b)

In the climax of the play, Chitrangada pleads with Arjun to ignore the bodily beauty and accept her for her essential, true self as the spell of Madana for one year comes to an end. Rudra has similarly undergone bodily transformation at the hands of the plastic surgeon in order not to become more beautiful, but technically a woman so that he and Partho could adopt a child. In contrast to Chitrangada, he undergoes tremendous amount of psychological trauma, trying to cope with the change (from identifying himself as a man to accepting herself as a woman), as if to bring out the lack of psychological depth and psychological realism in the portrayal of Chitrangada from being coerced into imagining herself as a man first, and then realizing the reality of her female desire. Thus, though within the film, Rudra's theatrical interpretation is lauded by the press, he is himself deeply dissatisfied with his handling of the theme. He is able to realize this only through his personal situation in relation to his homophobic father, the culture in which he lives, and finally through Partho saying, "if I am to marry why not marry a real woman, why marry this strange halfway creature?" It is at this juncture that Rudra gives up his desperate attempt to become, "technically" a woman, and thereby returning to his original condition. Though this is exactly similar to Chitrangada's return to her original self, Rudra instead of being united to Partho, is united to his family. He stands vindicated when his parents, especially his father accepts him and takes him home, thus reconciling himself to Rudra's desire to be what he is. The most gay-affirmative, and heart-rending scenes are those when he is with

his mother, and finally with both the parents. In fact, the profoundest moments of love and tragedy are in the context of Rudra's relationship with his parents, climaxed by some sort of a rapprochement between father and son. Thus, the ending is queer-affirmative through the agency of the queer subject just as Tagore's *Chitrangada* is feminist through the agency of the woman subject.

Ghosh succeeds in a thorough contemporization of Chitrangada, with the obvious message that queer existence is realizable within the framework of the family, and not by rejecting it. Whether this is a conservative resolution to the contemporary Indian context or not, Ghosh certainly has chosen his options clearly. As he says in his interview, he loves to have the freedom to do what he likes with his body in terms of looks, dress, and so on. He has to be accepted on his own terms and not through any bodily disguise. In sharp contrast to the fun and frolic and the happy resolution, all through Tagore's play, when the audience is barely, if ever, given any occasion to pity Chitrangada, Ghosh's film invites the audience to empathize with Rudra's abjection.[12]

In an interview, he gave in 2010 to the *Telegraph*, Ghosh has said,

> …I consider myself privileged because of my gender fluidity, the fact that I am in between. I don't consider myself a woman and I don't want to become a woman. I can wear kurtapyjama and can also wear kajal and jewellery and attend a social do…. The concept of unisex has been monopolised by women. Women can wear men's clothes. The problem arises when men wear women's clothes. Whatever I wear has always been worn by men. Wearing things like earrings and necklaces has always been a part of our sartorial history and tradition. … My point is why shouldn't I celebrate my sexuality?
>
> (R. Ghosh 2010)

In this interview given long before he did *Chitrangada*, Ghosh's personal predilections are clearly stated. This interview reveals how two kinds of personal circumstances remind two artists of one character in vastly different ways: Tagore's "train" of thought from a railway carriage upon spectating a natural scene, and Rudra/Ghosh's train of thought from spectating Tagore's Chitrangada. But finally, my own amusement at being observed differently by queer spectators, how I become the other, reminds me of my reading of Tagore and experience of Ghosh's film enables me to understand my experience better.

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[12] I borrow this term from Kristeva. See her *Powers of Horror* (1982).

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Chapter 14
Tagore and the Northeast: Dialectics of Human Intellection and the Nature of Aesthetic Reflection

Anuradha Ghosh

Abstract This essay traces the impact of northeastern India in terms of a shaping influence on Tagore. The aesthetic rhythm that binds the works of Tagore marking a distinctive tradition in the Bengali literary imagination is the result of a confluence of associations from both the home and the world. Engaged as he was, in the search of influences that would help him give shape to an artistic and literary tradition, the Far East provided him a source of inspiration, as a critical counterpoint to the norms of European civilization. His reflections of the Orient comprise the core of his metaphysical formulations on the principles of art, literature, and the creative imagination. This essay follows an intertextual examination of a body of writings based on the history and culture of northeastern India, and through an analysis of the interplay of history, text, and context of certain metaphysical formulations comprising the world view of Rabindranath Tagore, the dialectics of human intellection and the specific nature of aesthetic reflection, distinct from other forms of cognition.

Keywords East–West dialog · Northeast India · Chitrangada · Manipuri · Civilization studies

Following the 150th birth anniversary of the celebrated poet Rabindranath Tagore, it might be pertinent to trace certain less trodden paths of research like the impact of northeastern India in terms of a shaping influence from the beginning of his literary career. The aesthetic rhythm that binds the works of Tagore marking a distinctive tradition in the Bengali literary imagination is the result of a confluence of associations from both the home and the world. Engaged as he was, in the search of influences that would help him give shape to an artistic and literary tradition that best articulated his individual quest for self-expression, the Far East provided him a source of inspiration, critical as he was of the West and the norms of European civilization. His

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reflections of the Orient, his deep appreciation of Japanese and Chinese aesthetic traditions, his deliberations on the cultures of Asia[1] comprise the core of his metaphysical formulations on the principles of art, literature, and the creative imagination. This paper therefore wishes to examine the following three aspects:

- Trace the intensely personal nature of his ties with the royal family of Tripura that familiarized him with the cultures of the hill states, today demarcated as Assam, Meghalaya, and Manipur;
- Through an intertextual examination of a body of writings of the poet based on the history of the kings of Tripura, certain miscellaneous songs written during his stay at Agartala and Shillong, and assimilation of the rhythms of Manipuri dance and use of the popular folk narrative "Chitrangada," based on *The Mahabharatas* in a play by the same name, one would like to posit how his creative reflections are "rooted" through the "routes" that he takes to sojourn upon, in a dialectical play of the home *and* the world, as well as home *in* the world, in terms of the philosophy that he propounded in creative ways;
- Through an analysis of the interplay of history, text, and context of certain metaphysical formulations comprising the world view of Rabindranath Tagore, an attempt would be made to thereby understand the dialectics of human intellection and the specific nature of aesthetic reflection, distinct as it is, from all other forms of cognition.

14.1 The Historical Axis

While the body of writings reflecting his thoughts on this particular subject is quite large, not much work has been done on his association with the northeast, although this was a relationship which spanned over half a century. In this section, the personal ties that the poet shared with the northeastern people would be foregrounded by studying closely not only the nature of correspondences with the royal family members of Tripura, but also accounts of his experience of the region as found in the writings of others on the poet. The support from the Kings of Tripura initiated his familiarity with northeastern cultures, particularly those related to the old Vaishnavite route of Hindu influences in Assam, Tripura, and Manipur, owing to the nature of exchanges that Bengal and the kingdoms of

[1] See "Asia's Response to the Call of the New Age," Rabindranath Tagore in Sisir Kumar Das (1996b: 659–664): "Today we are born at the end of an epoch in the history of humanity. Perhaps in the drama of Europe the scene is being changed for the fifth act of the play. Signs of an awakening in Asia have slowly spread from one end of the horizon to the other. This glow of a new dawn above the eastern mountain ranges of humanity is indeed a great vision – it is a vision of freedom. Freedom, not only from external bondages, but from those of slumberous inaction and disbelief in one's inner power" (p. 661).

Myanmar historically had with these dominions. His acquaintance with King Birchandra Kishore Manikya Bahadur (1839–1897) through correspondence initially and later through his sojourns to Tripura as royal guest of King Radhakishore Manikya for the first time in 1899 initiated his interest in the cultures of northeastern India. This association[2] continued when Birendra Kishore Manikya (1909–1923) took over as king after the sudden death of his father in Benaras in a motor accident in 1909 and later when Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya (1923–1947) succeeded his father. In 1919–1920, Tagore's trip to the northeast comprised his visit to Shillong, Guwahati, Srihotto (Sylhet) and Agartala. Sudhirendranarayan Singha in the essay "Srihotte Rabindranath" recorded his first visit to Manipur where the nature of his welcome was phenomenal. From Chandnighat to where he was housed in Manipur, he was taken voluntarily by a carriage drawn by students and young men despite his protests.[3] It is here that he had a chance to witness the rhythms of a culture that was closely tied to nature. The dances performed in his honor by the young boys and girls at his residence impressed him deeply.

The matrimonial ties between the princely states of Manipur and Tripura stimulated cultural exchange and when he expressed his desire to start a full-fledged course on Manipuri dance at Viswa Bharati to King Birendra Kishore Manikya, Buddhimanta Singh, an expert in dance as well as handicrafts was immediately sent. His first hand acquaintance with the crafts of Manipur likewise impressed him and while he had appointed a lady teacher from Guwahati to train students in weaving, he requested royal permission for the wife of Buddhimanta Singh to be sent to Shantiniketan to help students learn the Manipuri art of weaving and allied crafts.

> During one of his visits to Agartala by special invitation of Brajendra Kishore Manikya (fondly called Lalu Karta), uncle of King Bir Bikram Manikya in 1926, he saw the performance of *Ras Lila* at the Pratapgarh agricultural farm. Scholarship in the area of Tagore studies has taken into consideration his personal association with the family of the Maharajas of Tripura which inspired some of his writings, the creation of the Tagorean dance cult influenced as it was by Manipuri traditions,[4] while his reception in the north-

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[2] See Barman (2006), where the poet's "prolonged association with the Maharajas and other royal dignitaries of the erstwhile Princely State of Tripura spanning the long period of about 55 years (1886–1941)" has been documented.

[3] See Paul (1997: 444).

[4] See Paul (1997: 446). In February 1937, in the introductory pamphlet distributed in the Excelsior Theater of Bombay during the staging of *Chitrangada*, the following note (pertinent to the dance form of the play and the discussion above) on Sangeet Bhavan, Shantiniketan was distributed: Saved by a chain of difficult range of hills from the puritanical atmosphere of the Bengali Society, dancing existed in its pristine glory in the native state of Manipur to the east of Bengal. Rabindranath in his visit to Sylhet in 1917 [1919] had the occasion to see an exhibition of Manipuri dancing. He was charmed with the lyrical quality of these dances and a complete absence of any gross sensuousness in these rhythmic forms. He knew his chance had come and he brought along with him two Manipuri dance teachers for his school.

east and his reception of northeastern traditions has not yet been closely studied. The latter aspect, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

Keeping in mind the nature of his personal association with the royal family of Tripura, which had inspired some amount of scholarly interest, it would be important to raise certain questions here. Although Tagore's association with the kings of Tripura has been well documented, does it suffice to restrict the parameters of reading this association only in light of exchanges between the poet and the members of the royal family? In his seven trips to Agartala, how do the ways of living of common people and the beauty of natural sights inspire his writings? Again, how would one even begin to gauge the nature of folk influences of the hill people for whom the poet's regard comes through his creative reflections in the form of novel, play, songs and dance rhythms, rather than direct accounting of it in the form of recollection through memory, diary entry, essay, pamphlet, lecture, etc. without an intertextual mode of analysis, linking certain distinctive formal features of his art? How does the history of the royal family of Tripura and his personal association with them inspire in him an understanding of benevolent nobility that becomes the cornerstone of his formulation of the "mahamanav" or the "great man?"[5]

14.2 Mapping the Interplay of History, Text, and Context

The body of writings that enables one to chart the influence of the margins on the poetic imagination of Tagore is varied not only in terms of the genres that he chooses to pay his tribute in, but also in terms of the themes that evoke enjoyment, by eliciting different *rasas* and their corresponding *bhavas*. The first group of writings is inspired directly by the nature of his personal ties with the kings of Tripura. His novel *Rajarshi*, and the play *Bisarjan* based on the novel, was inspired by the history of the reign of the fifteenth-century King Govinda Manikya.[6] The play

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[5] See "At the Cross Roads," Rabindranath Tagore in Sisir Kumar Das (1996b: 380–384):

> "At the present moment the World Drama is at the change of its acts, and we do not know towards what denouement it is moving.
> … This is an age of transition. The Dawn of a great tomorrow is breaking through its bank of clouds and the call of New Life comes with its message that man's strength is of the spirit, and not of the machine of organization.
> … The world is waiting for the birth of the Child, who believes more than he knows, who is to be the crowned King of the future, who will come amply supplied with provisions for his daring adventures in the moral world, for his explorations in the region of man's inner being."

This idea has a strident resonance in his writings on the Eastern civilizations as what he aims to give shape to is the notion of being in whom Santam, Shivam, and Advaitam reflecting the essence of Upanishadic philosophy resides in harmony as "*He alone sees, who sees all beings as himself*" ("The Centre of Indian Culture," Rabindranath Tagore in Das (1996b: 491).

[6] Sir Virchandra Dev Varma in a letter to the poet dated Jaistha 18, 1296 T. E. (June 1882) sends him a copied version of *Rajaratnakar* to "set right the occasional deviations from history " after reading both *Rajarshi* and *Mukut*. In the same letter, he also draws a distinction between the mythical and the historical and offers to collect information through popular folk narratives if required for his fictional rendering. See Barman (2006: 10–11).

"Mukut" was inspired by the history of the royal family of Tripura. While the *karuna rasa* governs the aesthetic form of the first two, the *vira rasa* dominates the rhythm of the play "Mukut." The folklore inspired play *Chitrangada* based on the legendary princess of Manipur and her association with the great Arjuna of The *Mahabharatas* is again a kind of *vira gatha* which provides him the occasion to pay a tribute to the heroic, liberal tradition of the Imas[7] of Manipur, reflecting the natural pride of women who are born free from narrow superstitions and orthodoxy-bound cultures that had stifled the lives of the fairer sex in Bengal and the rest of mainland India barring a few exceptions. The novel *Shesher Kobita*, however, has a different trajectory altogether as the location of Shillong, which serves as setting to the unfolding of the plot has little or no cultural influence on the narrative of love barring the description of the beauty of the hills, the purity of the air around, and the sights, sounds and colors of nature that animate the ambience in terms of the northeast as India's "exotic" *other*. Certain songs falling within the section titled "Prakriti" or nature in the *Gitobitan* were written during his stay at Agartala and Shillong are again a tribute to the majestic beauty of the region, where the particularities are submerged within the unfolding aura of the universals that governed his poetic imagination.

The novel *Rajarshi,* and the play *Bisarjan* (an adaptation of it) in which the poet himself had acted, is thematically woven around the idea of mercy as a kingly virtue. The reign of Govindya Manikya is regarded as the golden period in the history of aristocratic nobility in the kingdom of Tripura, and in terms of material for this historical novel, King Birchandra Kishore Manikya Bahadur had personally assisted him. Interestingly, the novel centers on the metaphor of ritual sacrifice. Horrified by the trailing streams of blood at the Kali temple at Kalighat in Kolkata where "jora patha boli"[8] is a common practice, the poet hit upon the novel beginning of the narrative where his voice is articulated through a child's point of view abhorring such customs. The little girl Hashi (meaning laughter in Bangla) and her brother Tata brings King Govinda Manikya to realize that the slaughter of 101 buffaloes at the altar of goddess Bhuvaneshwari (another aspect of Kali) is a meaningless Hindu practice. The terror in the eyes of these two orphaned children, their innocent query—"Why so much blood?" (*RR*, I: 704–705, *translation mine*), reverberates in the mind of the kind-hearted King. Following the incident on the temple premises on the banks of the river Gomti, Hashi is afflicted by a strange fever and despite all efforts by the royal doctor, she breathes her last, in her delirium repeating only one question—"Why so much blood?" and appeals to her little brother, urging him to come with her to wipe away all traces of it from the white

[7] The term "Ima" in the Meitei language means mother. The feminine principle in terms of a governing cosmic force has its manifestations in the lived anthropological domain. It must be, however, mentioned that the conceptual lineage of the notion of the Imas within the Meitei cultural context shares similarities with the idea of "Prakriti" in the Hindu theological discourses as well as the practice of mother cults in Bengal.

[8] The custom of offering two goats as sacrifice to the mother goddess Kali, in lieu of an oath kept or as a form of ritual appeasement is popular in Bengal.

marble staircase connecting the abode of the goddess to the river flowing by. The anguish of the child triggers off the well of kindness that resided within the King's heart and opposing the age-old custom of worship of his ancestors, opposing established religious institutions that had popular sanctions, the king banned blood sacrifice in his land. In fact, it is this action of his that creates political complication. His brother Nakshatramanikya, envious of his role as King, connived with the royal priest Raghupati to kill the King, as the priest feigned a divine command that he had received in a dream. Raghupati, constructed as an embodiment of Hindu orthodoxy, rigid, unrelenting and cruel, uses the sense of rivalry of the younger brother who is weak enough not to execute, however, the so-called divine diktat. Govindya Manikya, however, on learning the designs of the priest, is wise enough to forestall his brother from committing the dual sin of regicide and spilling the blood of one's own kin, leaves the kingdom in his hands saying:

> Why would you kill me brother? For the sake of this kingdom? Do you think that the golden throne, the crown of diamonds and the royal parasol, the sceptre is what symbolizes royal power? Do you know how burdensome this crown, this royal parasol, this execution of justice is? This crown of diamonds has concealed the anxieties of a hundred thousand people. If you desire the kingdom, then be prepared to accept as your own the sorrows of several hundreds; learn to accept as your own the difficulties and hardships of the people; recognize their poverty as a burden that you must shoulder – he alone is the king who has learned to bear, no matter whether he resides in a palace or in a thatched hut!… He alone is the king who has been able to conquer the sorrows of the world. The one who sucks the blood and wealth of the world, is a plunderer – the curse of the hapless cannot be countered by any power whatsoever… By killing, one cannot become a king; it is by charming the world alone that one is declared a king (*RR*, I: 719–720, *translation mine*).

The narrative comes to a full circle through a series of challenges that King Govindya Manikya encounters. It is through a series of hurdles that he is able to prove the nobility of his soul and it is the path of renunciation, rather than acquisition that makes him a King that is able to make opposites meet, and even his sworn enemies like Raghupati, the royal priest, the fugitive Nawab Shah Sujah accept his greatness as an individual. It is the moral propensity and a humane attitude that constitutes his role as an individual of unique stature, and it is this symbolic reworking of the idea of the king, not on material/physical terms, but rather on spiritual terms that imbues Tagore's understanding of the sublime.

A somewhat similar thematic trajectory is traced in the play "Mukut" (meaning crown) which works as a central symbol complex signifying royal power. The portrayal of three brothers—Chandramanikya, the crown prince by virtue of being the first-born, Indrakumar, the second-born, and Rajdhar, the youngest son of King Amarmanikya of Tripura, is tried out in the field of battle, their actions corroborating not only their physical valor, but rather their moral scale that tethers on a precarious balance owing to the complex notion of triumph of the spirit that Tagore wishes to foreground in terms of a virtue that defines the role of the King. Structurally, there is an interesting coupling of two narratives—one major and one minor—that work in complementary ways to play out the complexity of the theme. The play begins with an introduction to the pompous, overbearing nature of the youngest prince Rajdhar, who wishes to be treated with respect by his teacher

Isha Khan, who is the Commander of the royal army and an elder by virtue of his age. Petulant, sulky, and incompetent as he is, Rajdhar has been unable to realize his own innate potentials. Lacking the will to strive in order to succeed, he resorts to guile and treachery to win the contest of skills in archery by invading the royal armory and exchanging his arrow with that of the second prince Indrakumar who is a skilled archer. The crown prince Chandramanikya is a good-natured soul, forgiving and kind, and indeed too generous to be able to lead his people as he lacks in statesmanship. It is Indrakumar, who is a skillful warrior and a capable statesman, a bit too tempestuous in attitude who has the honor of his family name before his self, and thereby the interest of the kingdom in mind who has right political acumen to rule.

The complication of the plot is set off by this playful contest between the three brothers in which the youngest wins through deceit rather than skill and despite his knowledge of the matter and support of Isha Khan, his teacher, who suspects foul play, Indrakumar forgoes his claim to the reward of the King as it is after all a matter of family honor that is really at stake. Unlike his elder brother, he refuses to pardon Rajdhar and it is this conflict of interests between the two that is partially responsible for the death of the crown prince in battle against the infiltration of the Arakan army in Chattogram, now a part of Bangladesh. When the King calls his Commander Isha Khan to lead the three princes to war against the enemy forces as it was time again to teach them a lesson, he wishes also to test out the merit of his sons. The forgiving nature of Chandramanikya becomes interestingly a weakness that costs him his life in the field of battle when he fails to don the mantle of an impartial arbiter of justice and to rightfully reprimand the impetuosity of the young. The crown that the youngest prince fights over and the elder one easily forgoes hardly makes either of them the rightful claimant to the throne. It is the second prince with a sense of justified moral anger who emerges as the one who truly deserves the crown as he is capable of judging right from wrong.

The central question in both *Rajarshi* and “Mukut” is related to the ideals of kingship which in turn is related to Tagore’s concept of the sublime, the nobility of the human spirit, in thought as well as in action, as the rightful bearer of the title of king. In the documents titled *Rabindranath Tagore and Tripura,* compiled and edited by Suren Deb Barman, certain interesting correspondences between the young members of the royal family and the poet indicate the concern that Tagore had in matters related to the governance of the princely state. His own assistance in administrative affairs of the kingdom, his fear of British infringement on the territory of Tripura, his active counseling to the members of the royal family, both young[9] and old, necessarily influenced his creative reflections that made him choose the history of this little hill state as its setting. What he borrowed from the chronicles of the kings of Tripura, his own personal experiences with the affairs of

[9] In this context, Tagore’s letters to Prince Brojendra Kishore, dated Chaitra 24, 1308 B. S. (April 1901 AD) and Baisakh 7, 1309 B. S. (April 1902 AD) is particularly interesting as they are in the nature of instructions to the young, reminding them of their Kshatriya dharma. See Barman (2006: 27–30).

the state, as well as the politics within the family helped him to shape his ideas about the notion of virtue which is related to one's location both spatially and temporally and cannot be understood in general terms at all. Similar ideas about what comprises the features of a benevolent aristocracy are creatively articulated through plays and poems alike, of which the one that strikes a strident chord is *Rakta Karabi* or *Red Oleanders*.

The play *Chitrangada* (translated as *Chitra* in English) based on a similar legend in the seventeenth-century text *Vijaya Panchali,* codified by Shantidas Gosain, responsible for converting King Garibaniwaza to Vaishnavite Hinduism and destruction of the ancient Meitei texts *Puyas* is an interesting tribute to the heroic spirit of the women of Manipur. Although the route through which Hinduism first enters Manipur is not Bengal, the exchanges that King Khagenba had with the Shan dynasty in Myanmar who were worshippers of Lord Vishnu. King Khangenba built the first Vishnu temple in today's Imphal in the fifteenth century as a result of his influences and popularized the worship of the Lord. Although some conversions had happened, it took almost two centuries for the religion to get consolidated and institutionalized by the ruling tribal elite, and it ought to be mentioned that Shantidas Gosain was only an agent in cementing the diverse forces. One of the main reasons for the royal adoption of Vaishnavite Hinduism as a state religion was to unite the seven *salais* (clans) of the Meiteis enabling centralization of rule which in turn facilitated trade in the eastern corridor. In order to destabilize entrenched cultural codes of the seven *salais*, new stories of fusions with traditional Hindu myths and legends were necessary and like the story of Hirimba within the Dimasa Naga tradition (who were worshippers of Shiva), Chitrangada too was probably a construction to establish a lineage. Keeping in mind the dynamic form of folklore, it may safely be posited that this was perhaps a creative interpretation of the mention of Arjuna's travels in the eastern region of the country in the version of *The Mahabharatas* as codified by Ved Vyas.

The story of Chitrangada appealed to Tagore, and although it is not known exactly when he got acquainted with it, he chose to use the narrative in a play through which he pays a tribute to the people of this little hill state where he had spent a month. It is in Chandnighat where he had stayed and enjoyed interaction with the warm, hospitable people, whose ways of living, imbued by the freshness of nature, had not stultified into mechanical modes with which the poet was forced to live (at least partially), in the then state capital of British India, Calcutta. With the help of the royal family of Tripura, he appointed Buddhimanta Singh as the music and dance teacher and started the Manipuri School of dance in Shantiniketan, and since he wanted to expand this in particular, later two other teachers were brought on rolls to teach the art of weaving and allied crafts as well. Scholars working on the dance forms of the poet would be able to understand better the nature of this influence, and as a layman, I may hazard here that it was in no uncertain terms a shaping influence on the poet in terms of rhythm, style and gesture as it was complementary to his philosophy of nature. So influenced was he by the cultures of the northeastern hill people that when he had decided to translate some more of his writings into English, after the reception of

Gitanjali (which started rather as a playful exercise to keep his mind active after a bout of illness that stalled his voyage to England in May 1912[10] from Calcutta), he selected four plays to translate it himself[11] into English, and among the four, *Chitrangada* and *Bisarjan* figured prominently alongside *Raja O Rani* and *Malini*. Although it must be mentioned that the translations are rather at best adaptations despite the fact that they are done by the poet himself, what it indicates, however, is that from the range of his diverse experiments in writing, he selected two crucial texts that were located in the cultural context of Tripura and Manipur in terms of an offering to the West for an acquaintance with the scape and scope of his writings.

The story of *Chitrangada*, translated as *Chitra* in English, is a tale of love and romance. In terms of the protagonist, it is not the feminine wiles that qualify Chitrangada, but rather it is her aspect of a warrior princess that appeals to the mind, as she dons the mantle of a man, being the king's daughter, she had the role of a protector of the people to fulfill. The idea of love that works as the theme of the story refuses to portray the lineage of suffering women who are like Sita's daughters, willing to absolve themselves, even of their own identity to prove their purity to the world and dissolve in the folds of mother earth. Chitrangada in terms of her intrinsic qualities rather resembles the mythical Draupadi, born from the sacrificial fire, who refused to relent till her honor was avenged and undertook the hardships involved in a thirteen year long war, losing in the process much of her kith and kin. Chitrangada in man's attire seeks to conquer the heart of Arjuna, and after being thwarted by him she learns to be a woman and wins him over only to state that—"ami chitrangadi, rajendronandini… nohi debi, nohi ami samanna nari"—("I am Chitrangada, the daughter of the king. Neither a goddess nor a common woman"—*RR*, II: 241, *translation mine*). What she desired to achieve in love was equal companionship, and hence, she says:

> Would it please your heroic soul if the playmate of the night aspired to be the helpmate of the day, if the left arm learnt to share the burden of the proud right arm (Das 1996a: 49).

Later evoking the "naked dignity" (50) of her bare soul, she reveals her true self to Arjuna, unfettered by the "voluptuous softness" (49) of timid beauty. Recognizing her own "flaws and blemishes," she describes herself to be "a traveler in the great world-path" whose "garments are dirty and whose feet are bleeding with thorns" saying with quiet pride:

> Where should I achieve flower-beauty, the unsullied loveliness of a moment's life? The gift that I proudly bring you is the heart of a woman. Here have all pains and joys gathered,

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[10] See "Introduction" to Das (1994: 10–11), where a letter to his niece Indira Devi is cited as it provides an interesting insight into the context of why Tagore chose to undertake translation of a selection of his writings, particularly *Gitanjali*, for which he is known the world over today.

[11] See "Introduction" to Sisir Kumar Das (1996a: 25) where there is a discussion on the subject of what he chose to translate himself and what he commissioned to others and the nature of problems that he encountered.

> the hopes and fears and shames of a daughter of the dust; here love springs up struggling toward immortal life. Herein lies an imperfection which yet is noble and grand…
>
> I am Chitra. No goddess to be worshipped, nor yet the object of common pity to be brushed aside like a moth with indifference. If you deign to keep me by your side in the path of danger and daring, if you allow me to share the great duties of your life, then you will know my true self. If your babe, whom I am nourishing in my womb be born a son, I shall myself teach him to be a second Arjuna, and send him to you when the time comes, and then at last you will truly know me. To-day I can only offer you Chitra, the daughter of a king (50–51).

The phrase "heart of a woman" assumes a deep significance in Tagore's scheme of things as it reflects his rendering of the "nobina" (new woman) as opposed to "prachina" (traditional woman). His construction of the character of Chitrangada, who was perceived by her people as their leader or "warden" claiming her to be their "father and mother in one" and by Arjuna as—"in valour she is a man, and a woman in tenderness" (47)—is quite contrary to the women characters that he creates in his novels on the times. That Chitrangada is different from the world of women that the poet was familiar to, but not exotic in any sense of the term, as she was carved out of a cultural consciousness that was deeply imbued by the influences of nature makes this verse drama unique in more ways than one.

Following the tenor of the afore-mentioned discourse, it can be further argued that what Tagore found as a source of inspiration from the cultural context of the northeastern hill states is creatively transmuted into tales that depict the legacy of the heroic—the *vira gatha*—be it in the form of novel or plays on the region. The heroic, however, cannot be fore-grounded without a sense of compassion that is needed to temper it with, and the fictionalized representation of the legendary King Govinda Manikya and the story of Chitraganda can be seen in terms of a twin polarity of the poet's aesthetic consciousness, hovering as it does, on a fine balance between the *vira rasa* and the *karuna rasa* in a unique complementary bind that constructs the whole.

14.3 Dialectics of Human Intellection and the Nature of Aesthetic Reflection

In order to understand the complexities of human intellection with particular focus on literature and the allied arts, Tagore's relation with the northeastern hill states in terms of a shaping influence helps to examine both the "roots" and the "routes" that he undertakes to espouse a certain Janus-faced world view, caught as it were between the threshold of the "home" and the "world." His ideas on the question of the sublime in art, the nature of soul consciousness, the concept of benevolent nobility works both in a complementary/contradictory plane, synthesizing finally to address the issue of "culture and civilization" as well as "culture versus civilization" in terms of a critique of Europe and her "others." What he perceived in terms

of a threat to civilization was man's alienation from nature resulting in a mechanized, truncated existence, where the faculty of reasoning and critical capabilities is lost in "the dreary desert sands of dead habit" ("Where the Mind is Without Fear," Poem 35, *Gitanjali*, 53).[12]

Presenting his world view as Europe's "other," Tagore hardly takes upon himself to traverse the beaten track that prioritized indigenous identities in terms of an essentially pure source which has been sullied by influences that are foreign. It is rather by assimilating the best that Europe had to offer the world during his times that he critiqued her for her narrowness as it is in the gesture of colonization itself that the "heart of darkness" of her self-defeating mission of enlightenment lay. The "King" in the play *Rakta Karabi* (*Red Oleanders*) epitomizes, like Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, the vagaries involved in constructing institutionalized systems for consolidating power that is used to extract more than what is required from nature and man leading to a spiraling violence from whose yoke none can be free. This mechanical, blind system that aims to regulate human life by a relentless rape of nature and her resources kills all sense of freedom and justice and thereby revolutions in history are hardly realized as the oppressor/oppressed binary is not done away with but simply reversed. Tagore's "King" realizes that the "prison" that he had made must be broken together with Nandini (literally meaning girl), the embodiment of unrestrained freedom and beauty, and it is only through this slaughter of dead will that the dream of "Ranjan" (Nandini's beloved in the play; his name literally means "red") can be realized. In the last battle between Nandini and him, he realizes his moral defeat as even by killing Ranjan he was unable to bring the fear of the aura of repressive power in her eyes:

Nandini. King, the Time is indeed now come!
King. Time for what?
Nandini. For the last fight between you and me.
King. But I can kill you in no time, this instant.
Nandini. From that very instant that death of mine will go on killing you every single moment.
King. Be brave, Nandini, trust me. Make me your comrade today.
Nandini. What would you have me do?
King. To fight against me, but with your hand in mine.

> That fight has already begun. There is my flag. First I break the Flagstaff, – thus! Next it's for you to tear it's banner. Let your hand unite with mine to kill me, utterly kill me. That will be my emancipation. (Das 1996a: 250)

It is this notion of emancipation that Europe had failed to understand which became responsible for her economy and her people to be in shambles in the twentieth century owing to the two world wars. It is this notion of emancipation that the French Revolution too failed to comprehend despite its inordinate gains for

[12] See Das (1994).

humanity and the generation of liberal democratic discourses the world over. And it is this notion of emancipation that inspires the praxis of Latin American struggles interestingly, followers as they are of the Apostle, José Martí, and gets formulated in the discourses of Liberation Theology of the seventies, which facilitates critical thinking by a reading of the context alone, rooted through the routes that are undertaken to provide the foundational mooring of such discourse. Frantz Fanon too in *The Wretched of The Earth* (1961)[13] hardly fails to point out the twin bi-polarity of the nature of oppression that the "wretched," indicating both the colonizer and the colonized, are caught in, from which there seems to be "no exit." Although it might be taken as far-fetched to posit the case that Tagore's discourses on the East and the West have in them the seeds of the tenets of what is today understood as the field of post-colonial study, modulated as it was with the hues of a refracted critical consciousness that was deeply embedded within the polyvalent cultural matrix of undivided Bengal, this proposition can be somewhat corroborated if one takes the nature of his aesthetic reflection as an object of inquiry.

In conclusion, therefore, I would like to point out that Tagore's aesthetic sensibilities arise out of his intense perceptive acumen, as what he was open to, was the idea of assimilating diverse rhythms in a unique harmony of its own. Inspired by the different folk forms popular in Bengal, particularly the Baul and Sufi traditions, his deep internalization of the Upanishadic philosophy, his faith in man and nature, coupled with the insights that he had gained by his acquaintance with the cultures of Japan, China, and what comprises West Asia along with countries of Latin America and Europe, together coalesce to create a polyphonic unity, realized in terms of an aesthetic gesture toward the possibilities of realizing the infinite in what he describes as "soul consciousness."[14] What he read as part of his engagement with the philosophy of the Brahmo Samaj was experienced as a lived reality

[13] This dialectical understanding of the colonial process is best reflected in the chapter "Colonial War and Mental Disorders" where through a series of case studies of psychic disorders he establishes the existential human condition of the "wretched". See Fanon (1990).

[14] See "Sadhana: The Realization of Life," Rabindranath Tagore in Sisir Kumar Das (1996a), where it appears in the form of an essay where he describes fundamentally the relation of the individual to the universe, not in the sense of truncated beings that we have learnt to appreciate following the terrain of discourses post '68 France, but rather in absolute universals of the progressive edge of the enlightenment rationale. This notion has been best described by none other than José Martí in the following words:

"Trenches of ideas are worth more than trenches of stone. A cloud of ideas is a thing no armoured prow can smash through. A vital idea set ablaze before the world at the right moment can, like the mystic banner of the last judgment, stop a fleet of battleships." (*Letters from New York*, "Our America," January 20, 1891, 288). Like Martí, Tagore can hardly be quarreled with for his belief in absolute universals simply because post-'68 France the state of affairs is such that Humpty–Dumpty's "Great Fall" shattered him to pieces which could not be put together again, and since the task of a polyvalent grand narrative of enlightenment seemed impossible, it was considered all right for the Lilliput's to think that the parts of the shattered egg contained the "whole," and thereby do away with "totalities" altogether, as if macrological processes influencing human intellection can be wished away.

of cultures from the margins and the northeastern region provided him one prism through which he could gaze at the beauty of "[t]he [r]eligion of the [f]orest."[15] The margins too have paid their tribute, as it is after all Maharaja Birchandra Manikya Bahadur (1839–1897) of Tripura who was greatly moved by the poem "Bhagna Hriday" (Broken Heart) that he read while mourning the sad demise of his queen Bhanumati Devi, that he sent his Minister Radharaman Ghosh, a profound scholar of Vaishnava literature to bestow on him the title of the best poet in 1882, when he was barely 21 years old. The story of "Tagore and the North-east" would hardly be complete without mentioning not only the translations of the poet's work in the regional languages of Assam, Tripura, and Manipur but also the popularity that his songs enjoyed in the Meitei context, an indication of which may be gauged from the fact that a theater director like Heisnam Kanhailal, who in his first phase had been an active proponent of Meitei cultural identity, selects the story "Dakghar" ("Post Office") to break the conventional notions of theatrical language, questioning the aesthetics of form to fore-ground what he calls "the theatre of the earth" as the best epithet that can describe his work, unfailing in its reminder that the legacy of Tagore too orchestrates in rhythms that are diverse in their beat as well as tone.

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Chapter 15
Rabindrasangeet and Modern Bengali Subjectivity

Saurav Dasthakur

Abstract The "Bengal Renaissance" of the nineteenth century was a watershed phenomenon that substantially shaped the modern Bengali identity in many ways. The passion and urgency for rediscovering/redefining "Bengaliness" experienced in this era of "high colonialism" spilled over into the next century and were further intensified in the wake of the prospect of independence that foregrounded the historical demand for a "post-colonial" Bengali self-fashioning. Along with other discursive spheres in Bengali (and Indian) life, the institution of music also went through some radical shifts in this complex process fraught with many contradictions. This essay attempts an exploration of the interaction of *Rabindrasangeet* (Tagore's songs) with the deeply political and ideologically informed sphere of the construction of Bengaliness in late nineteenth century and after. The process of "musical modernization" already underway in this period received a robust thrust from Rabindrasangeet in particular, which, the chapter demonstrates, proposed a direction for the development and self-fashioning of the Bengali race.

Keywords Rabindrasangeet · Bengal renaissance · Nationalism · Bengal regionalism · Ethnomusicology · Cultural politics · Modernity

15.1 Introduction

This essay attempts a brief exploration of some aspects of Rabindranath Tagore's interaction with the process of the formation of modern Bengali subjectivity through music. It aims to understand how Tagore's philosophy of music, and its embodiment in his musical compositions, formed part of a broad modernist impulse to redefine

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Bengali identity in particular and Indianness at large during the late nineteenth–early twentieth century. In other words, the chapter seeks to contextualize the production of Rabindrasangeet by placing it within the process of emergence of a complex cultural sensibility of a region/community, which was not evolving in isolation from the larger "national" political–cultural developments. The history of discursive inscription of regional sensibility on "cultural" products during the consolidation of Indian anti-colonial and nationalist consciousness took place in parallel with the investmentof such products with "nationalist" iconography at a time of high colonialism. Lakshmi Subramanian talks about the necessity of constructing a comprehensive "history of aurality" in the sphere of Indian classical music that would start by concentrating on the "performing subject—elite and subaltern alike," and then move on to "map their aural practices—performance, reception, consumption, and reflection—over a period of time even when these were outside the pale of reproduction and then plot new histories of communities, regions, and resistance" (2011: xi). Perhaps it is time we took up a similar project in the sphere of Rabindrasangeet to complement the already existing body of readings—predominantly impressionist and structuralist, biographical and aestheticist—that have rarely addressed this musical tradition for a sustained "critique" of the contemporary sociocultural dynamics.[1] Such a comprehensive critical engagement demands a thorough cultural and musicological scholarship to which this essay makes no claim. I want to concentrate within its limited scope on a small set of interrelated issues relevant particularly to only one aspect of Rabindrasangeet, its production and composition, thereby keeping the equally important and ideologically embedded problems of performance, dissemination, structures of patronage, reception, and consumption, pertinent to Tagore's music, outside my focus. The question of production and composition, for obvious reasons, is of secondary importance for scholars and musicologists of Indian classical music, which is a performer/interpreter-centric tradition, as opposed to the poetically rich culture of Rabindrasangeet, where the authority of the individual poet–composer engages in a dialogic encounter with the existing tradition.

15.2 Mapping the Terrain

In the sphere of music, the most formidable and formative tradition Tagore interacted with was that of Indian classical (primarily Hindustani, but also Carnatic) which itself was going through a complex process of reformation, modernization,

[1] Occasional attempts have been made by a Satyajit Ray ('*Rabindrasangeet-e Bhabbar Katha*' [Things to think about in Rabindrasangeet 1967), or a Ranajit Guha (*Kabir Nam o Sarbanam*) in this direction. The dearth of such historically informed criticism in the sphere of Rabindrasangeet is particularly surprising, especially seen in comparison with the abundance of such criticism engaging with Tagore's works of other literary and performative genres. And created parallelly with these works, often on the same day, and with the same or at any rate a close mindset, the songs, which are no less literary, have somehow failed to evoke such ideologically informed critical response. Tagore's music, in this liberal humanist critical tradition, has thus largely been reduced to a mode of 'cultured' high entertainment.

and "classicization" almost during the same time when Tagore, in theory and practice of musical composition, was trying to "pluralize" the tradition by giving it a specific local hue in the regional Bengali urban middle-class cultural context. In both cases, the emergence of the colonial educated middle class, the sociocultural space and sensibility Tagore himself inhabited and often challenged from within, played a decisive role. In case of the former, this body of people perceived the "crises" that the great Indian tradition was going through, in need of immediate radical intervention on the part of this class, and sought to redefine and "rescue" the tradition by historicizing, theorizing and above all "nationalizing" it. At a time of the emergence of the dominant middle-class Hindu male nationalist discourses and the attendant passion for writing the nation through inscription of such discourses on all spheres and institutions of life, especially "cultural," the Bhatkhandes and the Paluskars embarked upon the project of retrieving the classical tradition from its perceived state of degeneracy through all-round modernization.[2] The renowned scholar and musicologist of Hindustani classical music, Pandit Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande (1860–1936), who took up the ambitious project of writing the modern, encyclopedic "urtext" of the tradition, for one instance, wrote in a letter to his friend Rai Umanath Bali on May 26, 1922, 4 years before they together founded one of the first "modern" institutions for teaching and dissemination of North Indian classical music, the Marris College (aka Bhatkhande Sangeet Vidyapith) in Lucknow:

> Poor music, I really do not know what sins music has commit[t]ed. No protector comes forward to champion its cause. Nobody appreciates its great utility. People will certainly have to repent one day. The next decade will kill most of the leading artists and scholars and by the time the people wake up there will be only fifth class musicians left to please them (as quoted in Bakhle 2005: 96–7).

Pandit Vishnu Digambar Paluskar's (1872–1931) project of musical modernization was far closer to the orthodox Hindu cultural nationalist program than the more "secular" trajectory of Bhatkhande. For realization of this project through a rigorous revival of "ancient Indian" musical ancestry, Paluskar founded the first Gandharva Mahavidyalaya in Lahore in 1901. Other sister foundations of the Mahavidyalaya came up in various other places in the following years, leading finally to the foundation of the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya Mandal by Paluskar's senior students in Ahmadabad in 1932, which subsequently became the Akhil Bharatiya Gandharva Mahavidyalaya Mandal in 1946.

Similar projects of modernization of Indian classical music, though of a much humbler scale, were taken up in Bengal around the same time by Radhamohan Sen, Raja Shourindramohan Tagore, Krishnadhan Bandyopadhyay, Tagore's elder

[2] For detailed and incisive discussions of the state of Indian classical music and the reformative cultural nationalist intervention in this sphere in the late nineteenth–early twentieth century see Janaki Bakhle's *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition* (Hindustani classical) and Lakshmi Subramanian's *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy: A Social History of Music in South India* (Carnatic classical).

brother Jyotirindranath, Manomohan Basu, and others who founded schools and institutions for dissemination of “Indian”/“Hindu” music; published periodicals partly or wholly devoted to music; translated into the local vernacular and took efforts to popularize seminal ancient Indian Sanskrit texts on music; wrote biographies of past Indian authorities on music and histories of Indian vocal and instrumental music in Bangla and English, to generate popular interest on the one hand and to highlight the glory of Indian aural heritage on the other, for perusal of derogatory orientalist scholars; prepared anthologies of musical texts and introduced the system of notation, and so on.[3] The growing fervor of Indian nationalism provided the larger intellectual–emotional inspiration behind this revivalist program and created the discursive space for this self-fashioning of the Bengali colonial urban middle class—the *bhadraloks*—to take place. The historical consciousness and passion for preservation evident in the whole enterprise, of course, owe its origin largely to the momentous historical association with European education and culture closer home in the nineteenth century, resulting in arguably the most defining moment in the emergence of the modern Bengali sensibility, the “Bengal Renaissance.”[4] The whole program of modernization of music in Bengal by the above-mentioned musicologists, more compatible with the Bhatkhande model of “secular” Hindu nationalism than the Paluskar model of “religious” nationalism, was largely “orientalist”/traditionalist in sensibility and manifestation, though the spirit of rendezvous with the Indian past, the desire to “reconnect” and the reformative zeal were the positive, albeit often unwitting, discursive contribution of English education. The result was only a fractured and incomplete modernity in music, as in many other spheres of Bengali life, that relied more on revisiting and reviving the tradition than reinterpreting, assimilating, and reclaiming it with any degree of creative originality.

[3] See Kumarprasad Mukhopadhyay’s *Khayal o Hindustani Sangeeter Abakshoy* (*Degeneration of Khayal and Hindustani Music*, 2003) and Sudhir Chakraborty’s ‘Bangla Sangeeter Nabojanmo’ (Rebirth of Bengali Music, 2007) for some informative accounts of the culture of classical music in Bengal in the nineteenth century and after.

[4] The assimilation of modern English education by the Bengali elite in the first half of the nineteenth century and more, roughly between the foundation of the Fort William College (1800) and Calcutta University (1857), was of course a complex phenomenon giving birth on the one hand to the “*baboos*,” the rootless and aping comprador bourgeoisie, described by the historian Niharranjan Ray as the “spurious middle class” (See Ray’s *Bangalir Itihas: Adiparbo*), the custodians and consumers of the dominant culture of the semiclassical Bengali *tappas* of Ramnidhi Gupta (1741–1839) and various cheaper genres of urban popular music, like *kabigan*, *tarja*, *panchali* and so on and the residual patrons of the *baijis*. On the other hand, it led to the emergence of a minority of “enlightened,” questioning, and imaginative intelligentsia, mostly Hindu and *Brahma*, in which the nationalist sensibility—in its conservative and radical varieties—struck its roots. The historian Susobhan Sarkar in his *On the Bengal Renaissance* talks about two “convenient, though perhaps inexact, labels—Westernism (modernism, liberalism) and Orientalism (traditionalism, conservatism)—to distinguish the two conflicting trends” (1985: 70) in this minority, which of course often came to coexist in an uneasy synthesis, in an individual or a group sensibility.

15.3 The Case of Rabindrasangeet

Posited against the backdrop of this radical musical awakening inspiring a wide reformative zeal in colonial India at large and Kolkata in particular more or less in the second half of the nineteenth century, Rabindranath Tagore's encounter with the Indian classical musical tradition and his so-called "iconoclasm" cease to appear to be an isolated instance of "revolt" of an individual genius, as it is often made out to be by scholars of Rabindrasangeet. Rather, his general spirit of interrogation of the tradition seems to be quite symptomatic of the time of the nationalist enterprise of construction and "modernization" of racial/ethnic subjectivity, through various components and institutions of an emerging "public" culture—music, literature and other arts and sciences, history, politics, education, and so on. The consolidation of the discourse of nationalism and the emergence of a new middle class toward the end of the nineteenth century, Subramanian has noted, "provided an alternative conceptual framework for the production and consumption of cultural artifacts and practice" (2001: 7). Indeed, the sheer volume of Tagore's theoretical and critical expositions on music, besides his creative musical output, and the time-span of their production—from "*Sangeet o Bhab*" published in *Bharati* in Jyaishtha-Ashadh 1288 B. E. (1881) to his last public address on music, published in Anandabazar Patrika on 17th Ashadh 1347 B. E. (1940)—reflects as much his intense participation in the nationwide politically nuanced culture of public debate on the iconography of music and its ethnological ramifications, as his personal love and passion for music as an art form. It is this dual response of Tagore to music as an institution, critical and creative, evident in his dual role—as a theoretician and non-academic historian of music and as a composer—that somewhat sets him apart from the other contemporary scholar–theoretician "modernizers" of Indian (and Bengali) music, from Bhatkhande to Shourindramohan. It also accounts for one important aspect of his musical modernism and his idea of modern Bengali subjectivity—assimilative–creative rather than imitative–interpretive.

Jurgen Habermas notes in his lecture on modernity as an unfinished project that since the late nineteenth century, in the European context, being modern meant an abstract opposition to tradition, which resulted in the emergence of the cult of the new that was both contemporary as well as future-oriented (Foster 1985: 5–7). In many of Tagore's expositions on music—notably "*Sangeet o Kabita*" (Music and Poetry), "*Sangeet*" (On Music), "*Sonar Kathi*" (The Magic Wand), "*Sangeeter Mukti*" (The Freedom of Music), "*Amader Sangeet*" (Our Music) and so on—his conceptualization of creative modernity in music, and culture at large, appears in the form of tempo-spatial dualities, which also point toward his consciousness of history and passion for futuristic contemporaneity. Duals such as East–West, Bengali–Indian, Bengali music–Hindustani tradition, yesterday–today, today–tomorrow are ceaselessly employed as tropes to emphasize temporal and spatial heterogeneity and thus, effectively, to historicize and pluralize the categories of "civilization," "tradition," "Indianness," "Indian/national/Hindu music" and so on,

and finally to carve a niche for the individual creative spirit that is invariably shaped by, but relentlessly at war with, an institutionalized tradition while being driven by a dynamic futuristic vision.

The ideological underpinnings of this pluralistic impulse in an age of imperialist and orientalist politics of reductive essentialization on the one hand and an equally dubious Hindu male nationalist homogeneous imagination of Indianness on the other—and the related Tagorean polemical and aesthetic interventions in this context—itself deserve a separate critical enquiry. In "*Bhaaratbarsher Itihaas*" (History of India; 1309 B. E., 1902), for one instance of such pluralistic ethnic imagination, Tagore writes "We must do away with the superstition that the model of history writing should be the same everywhere" (Tagore 1995b: 704–05). In a similar vein, two themes that figure in many of the essays and expositions in *Sangeetchinta*—notably "*Amader Sangeet*," "*Shiksha o Samskritite Sangeeter sthan*" (Place of Music in Education and Culture), "*Katha o Sur*" (Words and Music), letters to the renowned musicologists Dilipkumar Roy and Dhurjatiprasad Mukhopadhyay and several public lectures—are the relationship between music and local ethnic subjectivity and the construction of a modern "Bengali tradition" of music. In his inaugural address in the All Bengal Music Conference on December 27, 1934, Tagore said "Music is a life-like thing that exhibits a life of its own. I wish to place my theory of music at the crossroads of two symptoms—an active response to reality around and a felt inspiration of the mind to achieve something more than it has acquired. Music emanates from our heart as a reaction drawn out by our everyday experiences" (Tagore 2004a: 256–7; my emphasis). Tracing the evolution of Indian music over its history from the ancient times through the middle ages to the present and arguing for its spatially varying developments across India, he concludes:

> Every form of expression must carry a signature of the time, of the self. We have been experiencing and encountering all sorts of ideas, distresses and sufferings. Shall we not leave their marks [in our works]? What picture of the new awakening shall we project to our posterity a hundred years hence? Shall we show them age-worn items, a thousand years old? Shall we borrow the politics and state-craft peculiar to the British culture from the far-off shores and graft them onto our land? Today we must invoke the new. Let its music and its form and fashion, its poetry and its rhythm take shape through us. This is only how the Bengali can find their glory. Mere imitation will not do today. Let our music, painting and our politics be our own…Whatever we do will automatically carry the legacy of the Indian heritage…If the Bengali race wishes to express itself through painting and music today, it cannot do that by transgressing that heritage. But it can achieve something only by attaining an independence of spirit, not through slavish imitation (258–9).

The thrust, clearly, is as much on local/Bengali subjectivity as on national/Indian identity (in contradistinction with the British identity). What is equally interesting is the attempt at creating a dialogic creative space through an emphasis on individual agency/"the self" along with a recognition of the shaping influence of both the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of culture ("the time" and "Indian heritage"). The "westernized"/liberal modernist spirit—to recall Susobhan Sarkar's formulation—of the "Bengal Renaissance" is also evident in the clubbing together of the boons and banes of the colonial encounter in the form of new "ideas, distresses, and sufferings" that created the discursive space for a "new awakening."

The immediate context of this invocation of modernity, identity, and plurality is his view of the desirable relationship between the tradition of Indian classical and what he envisaged as modern Bengali music. The musicological reference to the "age-old items, a thousand years old," displayed as decorative pieces reflect Tagore's critical outlook to the traditional forms of Indian classical musical practice which he considered a non-evolving, outmoded, antiquated edifice that had begun to crumble with age. Forms of musical production in India (and Bengal), for him, were in urgent need of original and creative intervention that should look beyond abject imitation and mindless repetition by the virtuoso performer, the *ustad*, who he considered only a "mediocre" "non-creative" interpreter, bound by meaningless conventions, or, at best, useful only as an objective reservoir/carrier of traditional musical knowledge. Not only does the figure of the *ustad*/reproducer by and large represent for him mediocrity, the system of Indian classical music itself, he repeatedly asserts, because of its essential completeness, its inviolable and ideal state of perfection, has become a static and unalterable institution that discourages any ingenuous experimentation. It has refined itself, so to say, out of earthly existence and sentiments, and has attained the status of a classic, beyond the scope of any significant growth. In "*Sangeeter Mukti*," for example, he writes: "A great advantage or disadvantage of life in heaven is that everything is absolutely perfect there. That is why the gods are always drinking elixir, but they are jobless…Because there is incompleteness in earthly life, there is scope for creation of the new, the specific, the variegated. The world of our ragas is that heaven, always already complete. This is why the ethos of these ragas is universal" (Tagore 2004a: 50–1).[5]

A third aspect of Tagore's invocation of a new musical paradigm in the late nineteenth-century Bengal—besides building of the dyad of creative producer/derivative reproducer and a critique of the "monolithic" classical establishment—is an emphasis on the historical necessity for the new Bengali middle class to shift from the traditional role of passive consumer vis-à-vis Hindustani classical to that of active creator. Several times in *Sangeetchinta*, especially in his discussions and correspondences with Dilipkumar and Dhurjatiprasad, Tagore has underlined the historical absence of any strong creative classical musical tradition in Bengal. Bengal, according to him, had always been more or less a passive consumer of this tradition, and till the mid-nineteenth century, this network of consumption was controlled and patronized by the courts of the landholding Kolkata zamindars and the baboos. Never quite accepted in his lifetime, the contention has recently come to be corroborated by Dhurjatiprasad's son Kumarprasad, himself a practitioner and connoisseur–critic of classical music: "Kolkata traditionally was a market. Ustads from the north and the west would come here to sell their goods. The only

[5] See also Tagore's discussion with Dilipkumar Roy on March 26, 1938 (Tagore 2004a: 121). And Tagore's skepticism about the ability of the performing artist in general later spilled over from the realm of classical music into the domain of his own music, so much so that he grew very rueful about the nature of music as an art form itself which makes the singer/performer—apart from the song-writer and composer—an indispensable "evil" entity (p. 98). For a fuller discussion of the problem, see my "Rabindrasangeet Today: A Sociological Approach" (2010).

exceptions were a few second-rate musicians…Thanks to the baboos this city was always the biggest market [of Hindustani classical] in India" (Tagore 2004a: 124). Tagore wanted us to be active doers, not mere passive receivers, in the realm of music and elsewhere. Taking a dig at the figures of both the ustad and the consumer—baboo or otherwise—he writes in "*Sangeeter Mukti*": "The secret of one's fulfilment lies neither in accumulation, nor in passive and indulgent consumption, but in the passionate urge for self-expression. The reduction of music merely to a luxury-item in the drawing-room signifies its lifelessness" (Tagore 2004a: 65). "The passionate urge for self-expression," in the nineteenth-century Tagorean context, has distinct Romantic—and at large European—resonance. We shall briefly discuss the implications of this aspect of Tagorean creativity vis-à-vis our understanding of Rabindrasangeet in a while.

15.4 Tagore's Musical Modernism and the Spirit of the "Bengal Renaissance"

Tagore's own creative intervention toward "reformation" and "modernization" of the ideal/static "Indian" system dominated by "non-creative reproducers" comes at one level in the form of its pluralization or localization. He "Bengalicizes" the ragas not only by taking them back to their original popular roots through connecting them with local folk forms and thereby infusing a fresh lease of life into them, but also by composing new "pieces" that while functioning within the structural parameters of the system, bear the unmistakable stamp of his individuality, and effectively promise to turn into new ragas altogether. Dhurjatiprasad thus talks about "Rabindra Tori, Rabindra Bhairavi, Rabindra Puravi, Rabindra Sarang, and so on; it is also possible that it will be Rabindra Bhatial, Rabindra Baul…" (*A Centenary Volume* 185).[6] Tagore's return to the folk-roots of Indian classical music in the context of the contemporary middle class scholarly urge to inscribe "the (Hindu) nation" onto it is significant by way of its foregrounding of the vital role played by the plural, local, and subaltern syncretic sensibilities in the making of Indian history, culture, "nation," and music, which were presently caught in the process of being subsumed by hegemonic discourses. Such a pluralistic "alternative" musicological position is consistent with Tagore's imagination of the "alternative" in various other discursive spaces—history, nation-building, modernity, education, and so on.

Tagore's modernistic participation in the nationalist reformative movement in music is also marked by a "Westernism" in approach—as opposed to the dominant

[6] Rajyeshwar Mitra, interestingly, talks about an already existing peculiarly "Bengali" tradition of *ragas*—that included a "*Bengali Behag*" with *komal nishad* and a "*Bengali Bhairavi*" with occasional application of *shuddhaswaras*—and Tagore's creative assimilation and further refinement of this tradition. See his "*Puratan Bangla ganer patabhumikay Rabindranath*" (Rabindranath in the context of old Bengali music) (1990).

"conservative" revivalist outlook—independent, individualistic, secular, democratic in the sense of accommodating a dialogic space, "romantically" iconoclastic and yet strongly attached to the shaping tradition. The "secular" nationalist project of Pandit Bhatkhande located itself far away from Pandit Paluskar's Hindu nationalist program. And yet, not only did its "secularism" at times fail to stand scrutiny; both Bhatkhande and Paluskar—like Shourindramohan and others in Bengal—aimed primarily at archiving, reorganizing, and disseminating the traditional and systemic "Indian" music. The "democratic" impulse that underscored such projects was therefore ideologically propelled and consequently constricted by the largely homogenizing discourses of orientalism and nationalism alike.[7] For Bhatkhande, the figure of the "uneducated" performer, the *ustad*, was suspect, as it was for Tagore, but not because of his lack of creative originality and individuality, rather because of his non-intellectual, non-theoretical, and "merely" praxiological approach to his art, his lack of "*shastric*" knowledge of the authority, of conventional wisdom and resultant flawed internalization of the tradition/system, that effectively led to a chaos in the realm of classical music over the last few centuries. Tagore's departure from this broad historical impulse—an impulse more ancestral than futuristic, revivalist rather than regenerative, geared more toward disciplining and consolidation of a "static" tradition than toward making it living and dynamic—is remarkable.

This novel liberal humanist individualistic imagination of self-fashioning through cultural artifacts is inscribed, first of all, in the formal shift in Rabindrasangeet from the "ideal," abstract, generically oriented classical music on the one hand and from the anonymous, collective mode of imagination in the local "folk" genres such as *kirtan*, *baul*, *bhatiyali* on the other. There was also the semiclassical *tappa* of Ramnidhi Gupta in the early nineteenth-century Kolkata, apparently individual pieces by an individual composer, but functioning assiduously within the predetermined generic parameters. Similar diffident and unfulfilled promises of individualistic departure from the "type" can later be traced in Bengal in the compositions of some junior contemporaries of Tagore, notably Atulprasad Sen and Kazi Nazrul Islam. Indeed, this sort of contradiction in the realm of production of cultural artifacts in Bengal—as anywhere else—during and after the "awakening" points toward the uneven and nonlinear nature of the process of modernization and ethnic self-fashioning of a community in transition. The politics of "form" of cultural artifacts, including music, Theodor Adorno reminds us, is a marker of the socially mediated character of the work of art:

> Society has been inscribed in [music's] very meaning and categories, and the task of a sociology of music is to decipher them…It can only transcend the disastrously superficial reduction of products of the intellect to social circumstances if it locates the social dimension in their autonomous form and perceives it as aesthetic content…The social meaning of musical phenomena is inseparable from their truth or untruth, their success or their failure, their contradictory nature or their inner coherence…(1999: 2).

[7] See Janaki Bakhle's book, especially the third and fourth chapters, for a critical discussion of some of the "contradictions" in the nationalist programs of Pt. Bhatkhande and Pt. Paluskar.

The complete and therefore static Indian classical system, for Tagore, transcends the specific experiences and emotions of tempo-spatially confined human beings, evokes "human" emotions, and expresses the universal existential crisis. "Our classical music is not really the music of man alone," he writes in "*Sangeeter Mukti*," "it is as if the music of the universe…Indian music invokes particularly this universal ethos (*biswaras*) in the mind of man. It is not its goal to express emphatically the specific experiences of sorrow of specific human beings…" (Tagore 2004a: 48–9). It is a classic marked by the objective and detached Apollonian spirit of abstraction, of contemplative withdrawal into the realm of the disembodied form, the "aesthetic," to invoke the Nietzschean dyad of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. The reality of the classical universe is one of the essence and hence spiritual. Tagore's understanding of the European musical impulse, on the other hand, is variously expressed in terms that associate it with the worldly, the personal, the specific, the diverse and in this sense the "secular," in short, the Dionysian spirit, the spirit of pathos and involvement. This variegated celebratory spirit of European music, for Tagore, finds its formal equivalence in "harmony," as opposed to the ragas in Indian classical.[8] The Dionysian spirit, he suggests, leaves space for the individuality, the uniqueness, of a musical composition. As opposed to the performer/interpreter-centric Indian classical, which is generic and typological, and thus makes both authorial individuality and uniqueness of the composition redundant by subsuming both within the preexisting always already complete system, European music allows for the individual dignity of the piece of music and the "authority" of the composer. "Here lies the difference," he notes in "*Sangeeter Mukti*," "between the politics of music in Europe and that in our country. The ustad has to function in a very constricted space there [in Europe]. The composer sets the limit and the ustad has to abide by that dictum rigorously…In Europe every composition is an individual, expressive primarily of its own dignity. In India every composition is a type, expressive mainly of the dignity of the genre it belongs to" (Tagore 2004a: 46).

Tagore's own music, to my mind, has to be located in-between. Arguably the best aesthetic product of the "Bengal Renaissance," it embodies a unique coexistence of the philosophy of Indian classical and the guiding principle of what Tagore understood as "European music." To invoke a clichéd but useful metaphor, the superstructure of European musical spirit here is built upon the historical base/structure of Indian classical. In a truly post-colonial vein, Tagore's is a selective appropriation of "tradition" and its creative, non-imitative and deeply

[8] See "*Antar-Bahir*," "*Sangeet*" and "*Sangeeter Mukti*" in particular for an idea of Tagore's comparative understanding of "Indian" music and "European" music. It should be added in fairness that he was wary of constructing and confidently commenting on such a homogeneous category as "European music" and talking about "Indian music" and "European music" in such binary terms ("*Antar-Bahir*" 27, 'Sangeet' 32–3), limited as his knowledge was, as he himself admitted and as critics have noted, of the tradition. He keeps things flexible and open to revision. But that he was not off the mark by far in his intuitive creative understanding of the basic character of European music can be gathered from Satyajit Ray's article in Ahad and Khatun (1990): 152–76.

individualistic assimilation with the available modes of "modernity." Satyajit Ray also has noted that "the principle of Tagore's musical composition, as that of Bankimchandra's novel-writing, is basically European" (Ahad and Khatun 1990: 153). The inspiration for modernism in music—as in many other spheres—for Tagore, thus, came from outside, as opposed to the "orientalist conservative" outlook of several other noted modernizers of his time. Then again, the true history of this creative association with Western music has to be looked for not in the history of his visits to Europe, as several critics have done, especially through their emphasis on such visits in the formative phase of his life, but in the historical cultural predicament of the Bengali, taking shape in their own backyard.[9] The relentless Tagorean liberal humanist emphasis on individuality at various levels in the sphere of music is, to my mind, reflective of the troubled Bengali educated middle-class collective urge for "self-expression" in an age split between a spirit of "new awakening" on the one hand and various oppressive manifestations of foreign and indigenous passion for homogenization on the other.

First of all, Tagore subjects the generic and detached universalist spirit of the ragas to a desire for "worldly" and subjective "diversity" to make them expressive of the subtlest varieties of individual moods, passions, and sentiments experienced by the newly awakened complex and multidimensional Bengali middle-class subject.[10] This effectively results in an enrichment of the expressive capacity of the ragas and an enhancement in the Indian raga-repertoire itself. The same raga—for instance, Bhairavi, Puravi, Behag, or Malhar, to mention only a few of Tagore's own favorites in terms of composition—is given subtle twists through minor manipulation of *shrutis* and *swaras*, with its basic structure, its aesthetic nuances, and its philosophical implications kept unimpaired, to make it malleable to the new subject's "urge of self-expression." The variegated use of the Bhairavi form in

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[9] Tagore's repeated invocations in *Sangeetchinta* of the magic touch of the European spirit in all spheres of Bengali (and Indian) cultural life and his passionate urge to his people to make the best of this objective, providential historical force bears ample evidence not just of his creative Europeanism. Being, in fact, the point of seminal concern in a book of 350-odd pages along with the two issues of contemporary crisis and modernisation of Indian (and Bengali) music and the relationship of Bengali history and culture with music, it also cries out to be accepted as the objective solution he had in his mind to the problems plaguing Indian music in his time. Let me cite only two of his comments. He writes in '*Sangeet*' (1912): "At the root of the recent awakening in our fine arts is also an impulse from the living spirit of Europe. I believe that in music too we need these external associations. We must free our music from the iron safe of convention and exchange it on the world market. It is only when we are well acquainted with European music will we learn to use our music truthfully and well" (37). Again in "*Sonar Kathi*" (1915), invoking Bankimchandra, he comments: "The prince from the far-off shores has made his presence felt in our literature and painting, but not in our music. That is why music is still waiting to wake up. And yet our life has woken up. That is why the fencing around our music is crumbling down" (42).

[10] See Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *Bangali Jibane Ramani* (Woman and love in Bengali life) and *Atmaghati Bangalee* (The self-destroyer Bengali) for some provocatively interesting accounts of the emergence of the new Bengali subject through radical shifts in his emotional, intellectual, cultural, and literary life, shifts Chaudhuri describes as a "revolution" (1999: 15).

songs as various and individual as "*Oiyee Bhubanamanomohini*" ("Well-beloved of the whole world"), "*Durey kothay durey durey*" (Where in the distant yonder, far away), "*Dinaantobelay shesher phasol*" (The last harvest at the twilight hour), "*Aaji barshaaratero sheshey*" ("At the end of the monsoon night"), "*Aami je aar soite paarine*" (No more can I endure this), "*Prabhaato aalorey mor kaandaye gele*" (You left my morning-light tearful), "*Barisho dhora-maajhe shaantiro baari*" ("Grant that the waters of thy heavenly peace"), "*Ato din jey bosey chhilem*" ("We waited by the wayside counting moments"), "*Kaal raater bela gaan elo mor maney*" ("In the night the song came upon me"), "*Kano nayon aapni bhesey jay*" (Why do my eyes well up with tears), "*Jethay thaake sabaar adham*" ("Here is thy footstool and there rest thy feet"), "*Sakaruno benu baajaaye ke jaay bideshi naaye*" (Who sails by playing the melancholy flute), "*Sakaalbelar aaloy baajey bidaaybyathar Bhairavi*" ("The morning-light aches with the pain of parting"), "*Joubano-sarasinire milanoshatadal*" (The lotus of union in the lake-water of youth) and many more, or the play with Malhar in "*Aaji jhoder raate tomaar abhisaar*" ("Art thou abroad on this stormy night"), "*Aamar priyar chhaya aakashe aaj bhaase*" (The shadow of my beloved covers the skies today), "*Jetey jetey aklaa pathe*" (As I walk my way alone), "*Chitto aamar haaralo aaj megher maajhkhaane*" (My heart loses itself amid clouds today), "*Mano mor meghero sangi*" ("My heart keeps company with clouds") and "*Shuni oi runujhunu*" (There I hear the jingles from ankle-bells) are only two of many possible examples of Tagore's improvised individuation of ragas.[11] The conventional iconography of Bhairavi or Malhar is reconsidered to give them a protean identity that is essentially flexible enough to accommodate a combination of the cultural (Indian and European), the communal/ethnic (Bengali) and above all, the individual, and to make a unique composition out of each of these songs.

[11] I have had to consult several volumes for the translations of the first lines of Tagore's songs referred to in this essay, for no single one of these volumes, for various reasons, includes more than two/three of the selected songs, at times even only one, with the exception of *Song Offerings* which holds five. While selecting one translation for a song from the available more than one, the order of priority has been following: Tagore's own translations; those authorized by Tagore; those approved by Visva-Bharati after his death. The volumes consulted are as follows: for translations of "*Jethay thake sabar adham*," "*Aaji jhoder rate tomar abhisar*," "*Tumi kemon kore gaan karo hey guni*," "*Ami hethay thaki shudhu*" and "*Jagate anandajagne amar nimantrano*" *Song Offerings* (21, 47, 7, 31 and 16, respectively); for those of "*Sakalbelar aaloy baje bidaybyathar Bhairavi*" and "*Akash bhora surya-tara, visvabhora pran*" Mohit K. Ray (intro.) (361, 355); for those of "*Ato din je bose chhilem*," jointly done by C. F. Andrews and Nishikanta Sen, and "*Kaal rater bela gan elo mor mone*" Nityapriya Ghosh (158) and Sisir Kumar Das (266) respectively; for those of "*Amar sonar Bangla*" and "*Barisho dhora-majhe shantiro bari*," done, respectively by Amiya Chakravarti and Indiradevi Chaudhurani and Hazra (119, 157); for translations of "*Aaji barsharater sheshe*" and "*Mano mor meghero sangi*" Pratima Bowes (trans. and intro.) (9, 7) and for that of "*Oiyee Bhubanamanomohini*" Kshitis Roy (trans.) (114). Some other translations—to my mind at times better—of some of these songs are also available in the Internet. But taken together, the translation enterprises devoted to Tagore's songs cover only a very small part of his musical corpus. The translations of song-lines without quotation marks are mine.

Yet, the complementary character of the general and the specific is established through the centrality in Tagore's music of certain themes and ideas that run through these individuated compositions, thus making a singular, integrated text out of them, an "organic whole" in the European Romantic sense. In a sense, this complementarity embodies the essentially spiritual dialectic of the manifestation of the one through diverse many. Through a multidimensional and "non-modern" understanding of man's relationship with nature and universe, evocation of a mood of solitary contemplation of a universal pathos and a philosophical/spiritual resolution of this problem of human estrangement through a process of journey from sound to silence, from loneliness to harmony, these extremely nuanced texts keep staging the perpetual dramatic encounter of the worldly and the heavenly, the human and the divine, in essentially secular terms. And most of these tropes and motifs are present in the most consummate form in Tagore's songs on music where journey or quest is represented as nothing less than a state of being. It is significant that the first two of the three major sections of *Gitabitan*—"*Puja*" (devotion), "*Prem*" (love), and "*Prakriti*" (nature)—start with a subsection called "*Gaan*" (song/music), comprising a cluster of 32 and 27 songs, respectively, on music.[12] These songs, of all his musical works, hold the most fertile practical demonstrations of his philosophy of composition and revolve in terms of ideology of production and consumption, around the "renaissance image of (the Bengali) man."

15.5 Tagore's "Romantic" Individualism in Music and the Question of Form

Tagore's vital musical program of awakening of the Bengali race and modernization of Indian music, the intellectual impetus for which was derived from a positive assimilation of the adventurous, energetic, experimental, and humanist aspect of European culture mediated through the "Bengal Renaissance," can best be described as "romantic." As opposed to the classical idea of stasis, faith in limits, and reliance on faithful reproduction—ideas that aptly sum up Tagore's critical attitude to the Indian classical institution, and the figure of the *ustad*—romanticism is first of all about an attempt at adventurous realization of human creative potentials. T.E. Hulme understood the basic distinction of these two ideas thus: "The view which regards man as a well, a reservoir full of possibilities, I call the romantic, the one which regards him as a very finite and fixed creature, I call the

[12] There are innumerable songs which deal with the idea of music as a metaphor for life in Tagore's musical corpus outside these two subsections. I should have liked to elaborate upon this point, with examples, but for want of space. Also, I have discussed Tagore's songs on music somewhat more elaborately in Dasthakur (2010). A detailed content-wise classification of his songs, done by Tagore himself and followed till date without any further intervention, was introduced in the Bhadra 1345 B. E. (1938) edition of *Gitabitan*.

classical" (Wellek 1959: 3). The Tagorean romanticism[13]—in his experimental and creative response to the conventional forms of classical music production, his multifaceted, anxious and turbulent musical search for a philosophical/spiritual fulfillment, his mystic desire to catch hold of the unknown stray bird which tantalizingly comes in and moves out of the cage, and his purely secular passion for a throbbing and dynamic Bengali race striving for perfection that was not to be achieved—rests, obviously, on the strong formative ground of tradition beneath his feet that of Indian classical in case of music. His deep skepticism about the practice of unrestrained and disproportionate improvization by the mediocre *ustad* also evinces his ceaseless attempt to bring the classical (anti-excess, anti-exuberance) and the romantic (anti-stasis) principles into some sort of resolution in his music, and his art, and life at large. In a letter to Pramatha Choudhuri on January 29, 1891, Tagore writes about the conflict of these two principles in his life and art—the classic and the romantic—which he describes as "Indian" and "European," respectively: "Sometimes I feel that two opposing forces are at war within me…the European forces of movement and energy continuously in clash with the quietness of my Indian nature—hence remorse on one side and disinterestedness on the other, attachment to action on one side and attraction for abstruse thinking on the other…" (quoted in Chakravarty 2010: 30; translation author's).

One of the major accomplishments of Rabindrasangeet and its departures from the dominant Indian classical form—most aptly represented by the *aalaap* of the *khayal* genre—I think, is the invention of a concise, restrained, stable "classical" form for accommodation of what were essentially destabilizing romantic contents that precariously vibrate on the threshold of a perpetually deferred contentment. But then, inescapably shaped as his musical sensibility was by the classical tradition, the structural inspiration for this classicism is derived from the more ancient but marginalized, today almost endangered, genre of *dhrupad*. Tagore's love and admiration for the contemplative, literary/poetic, concise, and "revealing" *dhrupad* form ("*dhruvapada*" being derived from "*dhruva*" or poem)—as opposed to the "exhibiting" *khayal*—is well known. It is from the 4-*tuk* structure of the *dhrupad*, comprising *sthayi*, *antara*, *sanchari,* and *abhog*, which correspond to pitch-registers in the melodic form and lines or couplets in the verse form, that he derives the structure for most of his compositions. For only a few examples, we can think of the following songs of the "*Puja*" section, on or with references to music (the first eight of the nine belonging to the "*Gaan*" subsection)—all marked by a meditative centrifugal desire for fulfillment through identification with the unheard universal melody, and some with appropriate muted musical possibility of application

[13] Tagore's passionate love and regard for the English Romantic poets, especially Shelley and Keats, of all European literary artists, is well known, as is the fact that next to Shakespeare, the most popular English litterateurs among the nineteenth and early twentieth century urban middle-class Bengali readership were the Romantics. For an insightful account of Tagore's assimilation of the European Romantic legacy, especially in his poetry, see Bikash Chakravarty's *Rabindranath Tagore and European Romanticism* (2010).

of "*taan*" that would capture in pure musical idiom this thematic romanticism—that stage the ever-incomplete dramatic journey of the restless soul in its flight toward the infinite, all within the consummate "classical" structure: "*Gaane gaane tabo bandhano jaak tute*" (Let your fetters wither through music), "*Tomaro veena amar manomaajhe*" (Your veena deep in my heart) (both on Ashavari-Bhairavi), "*Tomaar nayan aamay baare baare*" (Time and again your eyes; Tilak-Kamod), "*Tumi kemon kore gaan karo hey guni*" ("I know not how thou singest, my master!"; Khamaj), "*Gaaner Jharnaatalay tumi*" (To the wellspring of music you came; Khamaj-Baul), "*Aamaar bela jey jaay saanjhbelaate*" (Time flies at my twilight hour; Khamaj), "*Aami hethaay thaaki shudhu*" ("I am here to sing thee songs"; Paraj), "*Tomaari jharnaatalaar nirjane*" (In the seclusion by your fountainhead; Kedara-Chhayanat) and "*Jagate aanandajajne aamaar nimantrano*" ("I have had my invitation to this world's festival"; Sarfarda-Bilawal). It is as if the uncontainable pathos of the unrealized romantic energy is saved in these songs—as in many others—from spilling over the given *dhrupadic* form, only just.

Another means of investing finitude, "humanity" and tangibility upon the essentially infinite and abstract classical system, and thereby pluralizing and "individuating" it in Rabindrasangeet is the use of language, the local vernacular. This is a practice again inspired by dhrupad, which combines poetry with pure music. One sociocultural implication of such linguistic "localization" is Tagore's bolstering of the desire for subjectivity of the newly awakened community, the speaking subjects. It is significant that Tagore has provided one more nation—apart from his own—a Bangla-speaking one, with its national anthem, and thus the political–ideological cornerstone of its self-fashioning. The monolithic nationalist iconography of classical music was thus made to engage with a complementary pluralistic "nationalist," and subsequently internationalist, sensibility. Composed significantly in *Baul* tune during the frenzied days of the anti-Partition of Bengal movement, "*Amar sonar Bangla*" ("My *Sonar Bangla* [beloved Bengal]") was also a response to the reality of the emergence of a culturally displaced Anglo-Bengali comprador middle class in Kolkata as a corollary to colonial modernity fast moving from a hybridizing to a homogenizing phase. The parallel emergence of the linguistically inspired Tamil Isai movement in Tamil Nadu in reaction to the "elite" "high-culture" hegemony of "pure" classical music is instructive. The Tamil Isai emphasis on "the richness of the Tamil musical tradition that had at its disposal numerous compositions that were no less classical and that had the added advantage of greater popular appeal" (Subramanian 2001: xiv) has distinct echoes of the Tagorean ascription of high musicological and cultural value to certain Bengali vernacular rural folk forms, such as *baul*, *bhatiyali,* and *kirtan*, especially the last one.[14]

Time and again Tagore refers to *kirtan* as a "model" Bengali musical genre in terms that further encourage us to musicologically and ideologically locate his songs between the two poles of various dyads that simultaneously complemented and negated each other in the most decisive historical phase of the formation of the

[14] For a detailed account of the politics and sociology of the Tamil Isai movement, see Lakshmi Subramanian's book, especially the chapter on "Contesting the Classical" (2001: 142–71).

modern Bengali subjectivity: Indian/European, classical/romantic, the ideal, objective "real"/the phenomenal, subjective "real," generic/specific, secular/spiritual, "pure" music/"literary" or poetic music, excess/restraint and above all Bengali/Indian. Additionally, *kirtan* has always been an extremely popular genre in Bengal. In a discussion with Dilipkumar on December 31, 1926, for one example, Tagore says: "The belligerent advancement of Hindustani music was thwarted in Bengal by the musical remembrance of the love of Radha and Krishna. The *rasa* of this music is based on a narrative. *Kirtan* internalised this narrative structure to evolve into a narrative opera (*palagan*). The form that this opera naturally assumes is dramatic. There is no place of the spirit of the dramatic in Hindustani music… To put it in a nutshell, the wonderful diversity of life and the savoury playfulness of music come to be combined in *kirtan*" (Tagore 2004a: 105–06). He goes on to highlight the Vaishnabite "democratic" character of *kirtan* as a music of the street and the close association of music and poetry in it. Elsewhere he also comments on the classical base of *kirtan*.

Tagore's love for the *kirtan* form, in several ways a lesser precursor of his own music—and also, to an extent, the *baul*—is also significant in the context of his search for alternatives in "nation-building" and historiography, his preference for the idea of "*swadeshi samaj*" over the "imported" concept of "nation." For him historically the prime mover of the course of Indian life has been social, ethical, and spiritual rather than political.[15] The authentic locus of life and history in India, thus, is the social life and consciousness of the masses, the "*subaltern*," traditionally ignored or underrepresented in the dominant discourses of history in India, which more often than not are borrowed from Western historiography. And much of Tagore's own creative energy was channelized in the direction of constructing and creating such an alternative cultural history of the "spirit of India" through his literary works, especially poetical and musical. One of the forms this endeavor assumed was a creative search for the nature of the legacy of Indian social–spiritual ancestry—from the Upanishads and Buddhism, through the medieval figures of Nanak, Kabir, Dadu and Razzab, Ruidas, Mirabai, Vidyapati, and Chandidas, to the Sufi saints, the Vaishnab mystics and the *bauls*—in the social and psychic life of the modern day masses.[16] The modernist "post-colonial" significance of this alternative historiography stands out in Ray's comments: "He primarily and singularly aimed at not writing a book of history, but writing the

[15] Tagore uses the terms "*dharmanaitik*" in "*Bhaaratbarsher Itihaas*" (1902) and "*dharmatantramulak*" in "*Bhaarat-Itihaas-Charcha*" (Study of Indian History) (1326 B. E., 1919) which represents a moral, ethical, and spiritual value system and not a ritualistically oriented religious sensibility. A few years later in "Civilization and Progress"—delivered as a talk in China in 1924 and published in 1925—he would find the closest Bangla equivalent of the western concept of "civilization" in "*dharma*."

[16] For an insightful analysis of Tagore's ideas of history and Indian history and tradition, see Niharranjan Ray's *Bhaaratiyo Aitihyo o Rabindranath* (*Indian heritage and Rabindranath*, 2004). Needless to say, there were contradictions and aporias in such a "national"/ethnic imagination, but the twenty-first century Indian subject needs to revisit the ideas in the face of the evident failure of the nation to bridge the yawning gap between the state and the masses.

living history of India. He had to study and contemplate upon the past history of India only *to create its present and future history*. His method is not analytical and dialogical, but synthetic and creative" (2004: 118; my emphasis). The spiritually motivated, often philosophically rich, Bengali rural genres such as *kirtan*, *baul*, *bhatiyali,* and so on were thus for him great aesthetic reservoirs of the past Indian/Bengali historical treasures, which should serve as ingredients in the present and future national/ethnic imagination. And *kirtan*, for its longer history and a more pronounced classical dimension, having reached a more advanced stage of development than the other genres could afford, and thereby attaining greater complexity and sophistication in form and content, had greater aesthetic appeal and exemplary value for him.

Verbal language adds individuality and "dramatic quality" to Rabindrasangeet, thereby making it European in spirit and Bengali/Indian in *rasa*. The stupendous semantic richness of this music, potentially accessible only to the speakers of the local vernacular and which constitutes here the basis for what Adorno calls the "meaning" and "truth content" of musical art (Adorno 1998: 171), on the one hand makes it a peculiarly Bengali aesthetic tradition and yet on the other hand, apparently paradoxically, keeps the realization of that "Bengaliness" in the realm of eternal deferral. The "truth content," as opposed to the "meaning," Adorno suggests, is not a textual or composer/author-centric entity; its realization is performative, collective, and participatory. It is "mediated by way of, not outside of, the configuration, but…is not immanent to the configuration and its elements" (*Beethoven* 172). And in case of Rabindrasangeet, the range and depth of semantic—as well as melodic and formal—experimentation make it a tremendously challenging task for both the performer and the listener to participate in the life of the "truth content" of this musical tradition.[17] Thus, the "Bengaliness" active here, to recall a dyad invoked earlier in this chapter, is in a state of perpetual oscillation between the ideal/utopian and the actual/phenomenal. As in all other aspects of production of music, Tagore's vision here is robustly futuristic and romantic. As Satyajit Ray has noted, the novel kind of Bengaliness projected here "is not the one evident in Bengali classical music, *kirtan*, *Ramprasadi*, folk music or Nidhubabu's *tappa*. This is the musical expression of a particular kind of Bengaliness peculiar to Tagore alone. His taste, his culture, his environment, training and education, aesthetic sense and literary sensibility—that is, the whole of his being is reflected in this music" (Ahad and Khatun 1990: 157).

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[17] Tagore was ever so sceptical not only of the ability of performers to empathetically render his songs but also of the ability of contemporary listeners to penetrate the "truth content" of his musical art. It is also worth raising the question today, moving one step further, as I have done in a forthcoming article, if it is at all possible to meaningfully participate in the life of the "truth content" of Rabindrasangeet today, in the age of fast disappearance of the "non-modern" episteme. I have suggested there that it is difficult, if not impossible, to do so "from an incompatible, almost alien paradigm of consciousness [which we inhabit today] … a critique of which has been the force of this art." There is a book to be written, as Lakshmi Subramanian has suggested in the very first sentence of her book, on the "history of aurality" in the context of this part of the world (2001: 11).

To be sure, the history of this ideal future "Tagorean" Bengali visualized first of all in the thematic content of Rabindrasangeet, started only during the "modernization" of the psyche of the community during the "Bengal Renaissance." The radical discursive shift in the Bengali (middle class) outlook to nature, love/woman, and spiritual devotion/"*Ishwar*"—also the three major thematic realms of Rabindrasangeet represented respectively in "*Prakriti*", "*Prem*" and "*Puja*"—was possible only because of the interaction of the community with English (European) culture and literature. Nirad C. Chaudhuri suggests that even the alternative Brahma concept of "*Ishwar*" in the nineteenth-century Bengal was a hybrid entity, derived not purely from the Upanishads alone, as is traditionally believed, but also from a certain older variety of Christianity. He concludes in *Atmaghati Rabindranath*: "The complete '*Ishwar*' of Rabindranath is first of all a foreign import, and the Hindu *Ishwar*, because of its close kinship with that outsider, slowly became grafted onto it unseen. The new '*Ishwar*'—which came to be the '*Ishwar*' of the Brahmas and of Rabindranath—is truly speaking the Christian God. But the Christian God the Brahmas adopted was not exactly the God of the contemporary institutional Christianity" (Chaudhuri vol. 1: 122).[18]

15.6 Conclusion: Notes Toward Rabindrasangeet as "Critique" of Bengali Culture Today

Rabindrasangeet, in its optimum aesthetic inscription of this novel, hybrid and general Bengaliness through the refined and sophisticated individual Bengaliness of Tagore himself has set a benchmark of subjectivity for the modern Bengali subject which was ever so difficult to achieve. It is growing increasingly intangible by the day with the historical civilizational (in the Tagorean sense of "*dharmanaitik*") paradigm nurtured and cultivated by the self-critical spirit of the "Bengal Renaissance" facing threat of extinction in a world order dominated by a virtual, simulated, standardized "reality," in Kolkata and elsewhere in Bengal. Here is a culture of "pleasure," inexhaustibly fed by the global and Indian culture industries, that breeds "false consciousness" and, Adorno reminds us, leads to "the illusion of a social preference for light music as against serious [which] is based on that passivity of the masses which makes the consumption of light music contradict the objective interest of those who consume it" (*Culture* 34). Also, the ethnological relevance of this chapter itself—or, more importantly, of the Tagorean idea of culturally rooted universalism—may be deemed suspect in this part of the world at a time saddled between the grand narrative of the global citizen on the one hand and

[18] Similar opinions were expressed much earlier, during the heyday of *Brahmaism* in Kolkata, by Kaliprasanna Singha in *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha* (1861). See Arun Nag (2012: 120).

multiple modes of parochial identity politics on the other. Chaudhuri's "*Apanbhola Bangali*"[19] (Chaudhuri 1999: 187), to my mind a very close equivalent of the "ideal" Bengali inscribed in Rabindrasangeet, ever a miniscule minority, is thus threatening to dissolve into anachronism with the increasing manifestation of the "pathologies" of the dominant discourse of modernity and our failure to devise an alternative, more "humane" discourse of modernity more compatible with the Indian/Bengali context of the day.

If one goes by Adorno's argument that "the criterion of the social truth of music today is the extent to which it enters into opposition to the society *from which it springs* and *in which it has its being*—in short, the extent to which it becomes "critical," however indirectly" (Adorno 1999: 12; my emphasis), one finds few more relevant musical traditions in India today than Rabindrasangeet. It was "critical" of the society from which it sprung, and it is critical of the Bengali culture today, "in which it has its being." The prevalent culture of mechanical reproduction, even if more often than not mindlessly mechanical and profit-driven, throws up the fortuitous historical possibility of a plural interpretation of Rabindrasangeet. But the way out of a self-defeating technological fetishism in this field is an ideologically conscious engagement with the culture of this music, through the concretization of its abstract critical potential. Tagore's rationale for the detailed thematic classification of his songs, provided as introductory comments to the 1938 edition of *Gitabitan*, suggests his desire for the songs to be received equally as literary texts. Yet, the two examples of a possible politically nuanced interpretation of his songs that readily come to my mind are from the audio–visual technological medium of the cinema—from works of two of the iconic Bengali filmmakers, Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak.

The application of "*Baajilo kaaharo veena*" (Whose veena is it that rings out) in Ray's *Agantuk* and "*Aakash bharaa surya-tara, visvabharaa praan*" ("My heart sings at the wonder of my place/in this world of light and life") in Ghatak's *Komal Gandhar*, to my mind, are examples of the creation of critical "happiness" that Adorno probably had in mind. "*Baajilo kaahaaro veena*," originally belonging to the "*Prem*" section of *Gitabitan*, and with thematic associations of divine music in it, is given a spiritually inspired, and in that sense "non-secular" interpretation that problematises any homogeneous perception of "modernity" and "civilization" within and outside the world of the film—aggressive, scientistic, rationalistic and hopelessly West-centric. In its mesmerizing invocation of the new awakening of the mind and soul, the song perfectly captures the spirit of humility, submission, renouncement, and plurality, embodied in the figure of the "*apanbhola*" globe-trotter protagonist, the perennial traveler, a firm believer in productive dialogic encounters with alternative civilizational paradigms. What is at one level the

[19] It is difficult to get across to the non-Bengali reader the implications of this nuanced expression. In a rough and rather inadequate formulation, it represents a detached and absent-minded, materialistically indifferent and intellectually/philosophically absorbed personality located at the meeting point of the tangible world and an intangible one.

melodic expression of personal emotions—"*prem*"/love for the song-writer and a token offering to the saintly maternal uncle for Anila whose soul experiences a new awakening after his arrival—amounts to a politically charged aesthetic statement that generates uncomfortable questions. The interpretation of "*Aakash bharaa surya tara*" in *Komal Gandhar*, on the other hand, not only foregrounds man's multidimensional relationship with nature and universe—physical/biological, primordial/memorial and spiritual, but does so against the jarring historical backdrop of partition, homelessness, communal fratricide, hunger and alienation in the modern impersonal city. The radical energy of the song, occasioned in the film by a group of struggling but idealist young theater-workers' visit to the scenic Kurseong, thus, bursts forth through marking a contrast with the "real." In both cases, the aesthetics of Rabindrasangeet is politicized, to comment upon certain crises and lacunae in the historical predicament of the middle-class Bengali caught in the contradictions of "progress."

Is not this one function that Raymond Williams attributed to informed criticism—which he distinguished from judgment—that enriches through renewal, emphasizing the need for us to find a vocabulary for the kinds of responses we have, specifically to cultural works, "which [do] not assume the habit (or right or duty) of judgment" (Williams 1976: 76)? "What always needs to be understood," he wrote, associating critique with praxis, "is the specificity of the response, which is not a judgment, but a practice." Can this not also be seen as an example of the Foucauldian idea of "critique" which ceaselessly interrogates what he calls the "regime of truth" and the subject's "subjugation" by that regime? "If governmentalization is…this movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth," he suggests in "What is Critique?," "…critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth" (Foucault 2007: 47). "Critique," thus, would not only lead to "voluntary insubordination," but "would essentially insure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of…the politics of truth." Rabindrasangeet, to my mind, can be seen as holding this radical liberating potential of "critique" that inspires the individual and a culture at large toward the ethically informed practice of "self-making" as art form and "poiesis" by bringing the contemporary discursive politics of truth and power into question.[20] In the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*, pertaining of course to a different cultural context from that we inhabit, Foucault defines his notion of "arts of existence" (Foucault 1990: 10) as a cultivated relation of the self to itself. This, for him, is a mode of "problematization" of the existing economy of power, and its practice belongs to "a history of thought, as against a history of behaviors or representations…" Such an aesthetically and ethically motivated political practice involves

[20] I am grateful to the editor of this volume, Prof. Debashish Banerji, for drawing my attention to this possible Foucauldian approach to Rabindrasangeet in particular and his critical responses to earlier drafts of this essay.

the "techniques of the self," by adopting which the subject could "seek to transform themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre" (10–11). That is one thing, I believe, Tagore did, apart from other things through his music. There is no other way that the contemporary Bengali subject can do justice to his musical legacy.

The translations from Bangla originals, unless otherwise mentioned, are mine.

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Chapter 16
Tagore and National Identity Formation in Bangladesh

Fakrul Alam

Abstract Rabindranath Tagore has played a major part in national identity formation in Bangladesh. In this twice-born nation, Tagore has been the site of a kind of psychomachia in the battle that has been going on since 1947 for its soul. This paper traces the role Tagore has been playing in the formation of the national imaginary ever since 1948 when the Pakistani state first tried to impose Urdu as the only state language of Pakistan. Even after the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, there continue periodic attempts to discredit Tagore as a cultural alien to Bangladeshis, attempts that have resulted in even stronger affirmation of his indispensable role in national development. My paper will thus discuss how the discourses on national identity in Bangladesh have led to the emergence of the widespread belief in Bangladesh that he is part of the national soul or spirit of the country, although it will also note that the debate over him is by no means over.

Keywords Nationalism · Bangladesh · Identity politics · Cultural politics · Psychomachia

16.1 I

The 2010 senate session of the University of Dhaka saw an intense debate over the part of the vice-chancellor's inaugural speech where he had quoted the opening lines of one of Rabindranath Tagore's song lyrics, "Oi Mohamanobo Ashe/Dike Dike Romancho Lage/which translated literally means something like this: "The Super Man appears/Thrilling all everywhere." Now it could be easily argued that the quotation was used purely gratuitously, for it did not seem to be related to the context. The only reason the lines were dragged into the speech appeared to be

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to signal hope but cynics could also argue that the quotation was invoked merely as window decoration. Rabindranath, after all, is widely used thus to embellish speeches in our part of the world. But I was not the only one present in the session who was surprised when one of the subsequent speakers decided to take exception to these lines because, as she put it, they were penned by someone who had opposed the formation of the University of Dhaka. This resulted in an intense debate as speaker after speaker either supported the vice-chancellor's decision to include the lines as an emblem of the visionary nature of his administration and evidence of his good taste and respect for the greatest Bengali poet of all times, or decided to disparage the vice-chancellor for trying to insert into his speech a message from someone who was opposed to the ethos that had led to the birth of Bangladesh.

I begin my paper on Rabindranath and Bangladeshi national formation with this anecdote because it is characteristic of the strong passion he still evokes in Bangladesh. On one side—and I hasten to add that they constitute the majority—are people who see him as the quintessentially Bengali poet whose verse and songs are a perpetual fount of inspiration and good sense. These are the people who are proud that he is the composer of our national anthem and that he has drawn inspiration for many of his most memorable compositions from this part of Bengal. Indeed, he is so ubiquitous in the lives of these Bangladeshis that most events—senate sessions or book launches or discussions about the weather or personal encounters—seem to be incomplete without allusions to his voluminous works or quotations from them or singing of his songs. On the other hand are some Bangladeshis—the minority in this case but not a tiny one—who feel that he should not be invoked at all in any national event and who would like to minimize his influence in the country. The former side feels that Rabindranath's work is intrinsic to being Bangladeshi and that is why it is entirely appropriate that he should have written the national anthem of the country while the latter group feels that it is unfortunate that he should be a major presence in public as well as personal events in the country and that he should be left to Indian Bengalis who alone have all the reasons in the world to embrace him.

William van Schendel, one of the most acute students of contemporary Bangladeshi political and cultural history, published an excellent paper in 2001 on the ideological fissures of the country titled "Who Speaks for the Nation? Nationalist Rhetoric and the Challenges of Cultural Pluralism in Bangladesh," where he detects three strains dominating debates over national identity formation in Bangladesh. The first of these he characterizes as "establishment nationalism" since it was largely responsible for the birth of the nation. Emanating from linguistic nationalism, and the movement that gained impetus on February 21, 1952, when blood was shed in the campus of the University of Dhaka by students and protesters rallying against the Pakistan government's decision to impose Urdu as the only state language of Pakistan, establishment nationalism grew in strength even as the Pakistani state apparatus devised newer forms of repression to hold East Pakistanis in check and maneuver them ideologically to clear of what they apprehended to be Hindu/Indian strains in Bengali culture. In the struggle between

the "establishment nationalists" and the "Islamist," East Pakistanis who toed the official Pakistani line in culture as well as politics and were zealous about warding off ideological contamination in the Islamic Republic, it is, of course, the establishment nationalists who steered East Pakistanis toward Bangladesh which then for a while officially became a secular as well as democratic country. Unfortunately, Schendel points out, the "establishment nationalists" performed poorly in power and, in any case, a series of coups and counter-coups in the 1970s led to successive military governments where the constitution enshrining the core principles of "nationalism, socialism, democracy, and secularism" was first emended and then finally tinctured with Islamic doses, giving rise to a strain that Schendel diagnoses as "Islamist." According to him, Bangladesh then went through an ideological crisis from the mid-1970s as the Islamists gained ascendancy and tried to marginalize the "establishment" nationalists who then tried to regroup and transform themselves into what he calls "renewal nationalists." These people strove to employ the "old symbols of an independent, secular and democratic Bangladesh," for instance, by commemorating "Language Day (21 February), Independence Day (26 March), and Victory Day (16 December) and emphasizing Bengali customs and rituals" (109). The Islamists, for their part, buttressed by state power during the period of military rule, prioritized Islam as "a model for creating a state which was more moral, accountable and self-reliant" and resorted to a different set of symbols in public life. These included "the Arabic language, the Qur'an, highly gendered codes of dress, behavior and morality and the celebration of Islamic festivals" (110). The former group is led in national politics by the Awami League (AL) and left-leaning parties while the latter have joined the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which in turn is supported by overtly Islamic parties such as the Jamat-e-Islami. I should add that since the 1990s, when the military was compelled to withdraw from national politics, Bangladesh has alternated between the two parties except for the 2 year interregnum beginning in January 2006 when the army intervened to resolve a political stalemate over election procedures. Currently, a coalition headed by the Awami League governs Bangladesh. I should also add that Schendel discerns a third group emerging in Bangladesh since the 1990s who are trying to attract attention by proclaiming "cultural pluralism" as the most viable option to lead Bangladesh forward to peace and prosperity in the new millennium.

In his 2009 book, *A History of Bangladesh,* Schendel detects two competing narratives that have vied to represent the story of the birth of the nation. One of them has been influenced by the mantra of what he had called in his earlier paper "establishment nationalism." He calls this the narrative of "Bengaliness." Framers of this version of the country's history "imagined Bangladesh as the homeland of Bengalis who had been denied justice under Pakistan" (202). They envisaged it as a nation which was not only a "linguistic community" but also a cultural formation where Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul Islam, folksongs, and Baul mysticism played crucial roles. The other narrative Schendel labels "Bangladeshiness." Framers of this narrative, Schendel stresses, take pain to distinguish it from "Bengaliness" and tell the story of the birth and progress of a nation that is

"overwhelmingly and *essentially* Muslim" (his emphasis). Unlike the "Bengali" narrative which traces the roots of the nation in the language movement and the war of liberation, this one sees Bangladesh "originating in the movement for Pakistan and the 1970 war" and feels "that the Bangladeshi nation was the ultimate manifestation of the delta's Muslim–Bengali identity" (203). As far as historical landmarks are concerned, it considers 1947 as "necessary for 1971 to happen." I would like to add that it finds the partition of Bengal in 1905 to be the originary moment of the narrative of Bangladesh.

Schendel's shrewd analysis and helpful categorizations of the competing narratives of Bangladeshi history and identification of the stresses and strains in Bangladeshi national identity formation can help place the debate over Rabindranath Tagore in the University of Dhaka earlier this year in perspective. The vice-chancellor and his supporters represent the "establishment" and "renewal" nationalists who locate Rabindranath in the soul of the nation while the speaker who resented the reference to him in the inaugural speech and those who supported her view consider him as extraneous to the birth and growth of the country. The debate in the university's senate is, in fact, paradigmatic of the tussle over Rabindranath that has been going on in the part of the subcontinent that was once East Bengal and later became East Pakistan and that is now the independent nation of Bangladesh. It is the story of the debate over the role he has had in the past and its significance at present that I will focus on in the rest of the paper.

16.2 II

Although he was born in Kolkata and grew up in the Tagore family's Jorasanko house in the city, Rabindranath could claim his ancestry in the part of Bengal which is now Bangladesh. Legend has it that his forefathers moved to Kolkata from Jessore. Also, the Tagore had business and marriage connections as well as estates that tied them to the region (Rabindranath's wife, for example, came from Khulna). His father Debendranath first sent him to look after parts of his zemindari when the poet was in his twenties and he kept visiting them for this reason for at least two decades. He would stay for extended periods of time in Shelaidah, Kushtia and/or travel by boat to Shahjadpur, Pabna, and Patishar in Rajshahi. It is in these East Bengali Tagore estates that he was assigned to manage or in the houseboat ferrying him to and from these places that he wrote some of his most famous poems, songs, plays, fiction, letters, and prose pieces. His growing literary fame meant that he would also travel to literary events in these parts every once in a while. His experience as a landlord and interest in the life of his tenants also led him to experiment with rural reconstruction and agricultural development in his family estates and his passion for education made him initiate educational schemes here on a few occasions. After the Nobel Prize made him a much sought after man at home and abroad and because of his growing commitment to his educational ventures in Santiniketan, Rabindranath was unable to devote much time to

these estates in the later part of his life, but his fame now meant that he would be feted in East Bengal on a number of occasions. In other words, during his lifetime, he was very much part of the region and had become an iconic figure there a long time before his death in 1941.

Syed Abul Maksud's book, *Purabange Rabindranath* (*Rabindranath in East Bengal*) includes some fascinating essays of the impact the poet had on the educated section of the people of the region during his lifetime. The first of these essays details his role in a provincial conference held in 1898 and concludes that long before the Nobel Prize had made him famous or even before his major works were published "he had won the hearts of the people of Dhaka" because of the part he played in the conference (23, my translation). In the second essay of the book Maksud records how the leading Muslim aristocrat of Dhaka, Nawab Salimullah, "paid rich tributes to the greatest poetical genius of modern India" in a meeting organized in the city on November 26, 1912 to celebrate his Nobel Prize award. Maksud also documents the enthusiastic reception accorded to Rabindranath by the Salimullah Muslim Hall Student Union of the University of Dhaka on February 10, 1926 during his second and last visit to Dhaka. He was in the city for an event-filled 3 days during this tour, which was centered on the speech he delivered at the university titled "The Meaning of Art." But as Maksud points out, he continued to correspond with people of the region, promote them any way he could, and contribute his works to support literary publications from this part of Bengal. It should also be pointed out that the University of Dhaka awarded Rabindranath an honorary doctorate in 1940.

In fact, Rabindranath had acquired mythic proportions throughout Bengal during his lifetime, partly due to his Nobel Prize but also due to his role during the partition of 1905 when he had first opposed the bifurcation of the province and played a key role in the swadeshi movement and then distanced himself from it. The strong position he had taken on major events of the period such as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, when he had formally renounced his knighthood, also endeared him to people who were becoming increasingly anti-British. His writings were being taught in schools and colleges even before his death in 1941 while not a few East Bengalis would have been listening to his songs being broadcast on All India Radio at this time. By the 1930s, his plays too were being performed in Dhaka. Ordinary educated middle-class Bengali Muslims of the region like my parents, for example, grew up in the 1930s imbibing his works. My father, in particular, was devoted all his life to Rabindra Sangeet and my mother seemed to have quite a few quotations from Rabindranath's poems ready to hurl at us whenever she felt we were deviating from the right path.

In an essay titled "Literary Assessments of Tagore by Bengali Muslim Writers," Mahmud Shah Quereshi discusses the considerable impact Rabindranath had on the major Bengali Muslim writers of the period. With the foremost of them, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Rabindranath had a very amicable relationship, while leading Bengali Muslim poets like Golam Mostafa and Jasimuddin and scholars like Muhammad Mansooruddin and Dr. Kazi Shahidullah were effusive in their appreciation of Rabindranath's works just as he seemed to have done his bit to

support their endeavors. Quereshi notes that his research on these and other Muslim Bengali writers of the region had led him to conclude that they had found Rabindranath to be "*poliquement correct,* like Chittaranjan Das and Subhas Chandra Bose," that is to say, acceptable because of his "impartial stance on the Hindu–Muslim conflicts that were dividing Bengalis at this time" (390).

Of course, not all Bengali Muslims, and as Maksud indicates in another chapter of his book, and for that matter, not even all Hindus, were Tagore fans, and there were a number of Bengalis who were dissatisfied with him for this or that petty reason at one point or the other of his life. However, it was only in the 1940s when the movement to slice India and create an independent state for Indian Muslims gathered momentum that a section of Bengali Muslim intellectuals began to speak of distancing themselves from Tagore's overwhelming presence in Bengali literature, for he had been growing in stature in Bengal despite his death. Representative of the view that Bengali Muslims striving for an independent Pakistan needed to get rid of the influence of Rabindranath in their quest for a distinctive identity was the columnist Abul Mansur Ahmed, who had this to say in the speech that he delivered at the East Pakistan Renaissance Society at Kolkata on the eve of Partition on July 2, 1944:

> The Muslims of Bengal…cannot be great by imitating Rabindranath. They will have to develop their own identity on the basis of their culture. In the world of Visva-Bharati of the world-poet Rabindranath, so many times has the joyous Mother come and departed, but never for a day in the sky of that world did the moon of Eid and Mohorram appear. To make that moon appear the task was left to Nazrul Islam. There is nothing to regret because it is natural. So it is the harsh truth. (Quoted by Quereshi and in his translation, 403)

As Quereshi indicates, Ahmed's comments are harbingers of "a mild anti-Tagore cultural and intellectual movement" (ibid) in East Pakistan for after Partition some intellectuals of the nascent Islamic Republic of Pakistan began to reconnoiter the immediate past to invent a cultural tradition that would distance them from India and give their work an Islamist face. Ahmed's privileging of Nazrul at the expense of Tagore is also noteworthy; it would be a ploy that would be used again and again by Islamists in East Pakistan, although the two poets had admired each other and seen their works as complementary in their lifetime; and Nazrul was thoroughly secular.

16.3 III

The next stage of identity formation of the part of the subcontinent which would eventually become Bangladesh was the crucial one for its birth. In understanding the history of this phase, it has to be remembered that the catalyst was the incident that took place on February 21, 1952, when the Pakistani government decided to use force to impose Urdu as the only state language of Pakistan. The consequence was that a number of students and bystanders were killed on that day, and the movement to establish Bengali as one of the state languages of Pakistan

not only gathered momentum but also a process started that would lead to the breakup of the country. In other words, linguistic nationalism is the motor that drove East Pakistan toward Bangladesh and Pakistani attempts to suppress the language movement triggered the collapse of the Islamist state. Since more than any other person Rabindranath is the architect of modern Bengali, he would inevitably become a key rallying point for the activists of the movement. Bids to eliminate him from East Pakistan's cultural history would only fuel the resistance to the Pakistani state. In trying to minimize his presence in East Pakistan, the government of the country only succeeded in making East Bengalis realize that he was central to the formation of their distinctive identity.

However, despite its one-state language policy, the Pakistani government did not feel at first that Rabindranath's work would pose a problem as it set about to mold its citizens as Pakistanis and establish a unique cultural tradition for them. Initially, his work continued to be taught in schools and colleges of East Pakistan; Radio Pakistan kept giving sufficient airtime to his songs. Indeed, in the concluding essay of his book, *Purbobange Rabindranath,* Moksud shows that on December 14, 1947, that is to say some months after the birth of the Islamic Republic, there was no appreciable difference between the time allotted for Rabindra Sangeet on Radio Pakistan's Dhaka station and on the Kolkata station of All India Radio (69–71). Also, Radio Pakistan did not seem to be privileging Nazrul's music at the expense of Tagore's at this time. His essay makes it clear that Rabindranath clearly was not seen as a threat by those in charge of cultural policy at this juncture of Pakistani history. Nevertheless, in her compilation of essays on the poet, *Rabindranath: Tnar Akash Vora Kole* (*In Rabindranath's Vast Embrace*) Sanjida Khatun, the noted Bengali scholar and able exponent of his music, remembers how when she returned to East Pakistan in 1959 after doing higher studies in Viswa Bharati, she detected a decline in the popularity of Rabindra Sangeet in the intervening years when a military government had seized control over Pakistan. According to her, it was as if some "unwritten directive" was trying to play down his significance in East Pakistan (117).

Intellectuals influenced by the stance taken by the likes of Ahmed began to stress that Rabindranath's influence should be minimized and an alternative tradition of writing be promoted to uphold the Islamist nature of the state. These intellectuals became increasingly active in affiliating themselves with the Islamic polity and in alienating themselves from what they characterized as Hindu elements in Bengali cultural traditions. Typical of intellectuals who professed the second line is Syed Ali Ahsan, a distinguished scholar and poet and a self-proclaimed lover of Rabindranath who asserted that "if need be, for the sake of Pakistani state ideology and integration Bengali Pakistanis would have to forego" him (quoted by Shamsuzaman Khan, 3)

In his very helpful account over the debate over Rabindranath in the province, Shamsuzzaman Khan, now the director of the Bangla Academy, or the Academy for Bengali Letters, observes that it was during the months leading to the one hundred birth anniversary of the poet that the debate over Rabindranath's place in East Pakistan intensified. He came under direct official attack in 1961 when the

government revised its cultural policy and decided to ignore the one hundredth anniversary of the poet's birth that was being celebrated all over the world. The Bangla Academy, the institution that was supposed to be the hub on such occasions, decided to overlook it.

On the other hand, wanting to be in-line with the worldwide celebration of the anniversary, East Pakistani devotees of Rabindranath got together to form a committee that would draw up a series of events throughout the country. This committee included prominent writers, academics, cultural activists, and some very high-ranking Bengali government officials, including the Chief Justice of the East Pakistan High Court. It organized a ten-day program centering on the anniversary. The Dhaka University Central Student's Union also decided to celebrate the event through a two-day program. But as soon as the news spread that the anniversary was going to be held on a grand scale, the Islamists set up a counter-movement to discredit the work of the committee. For a month that year, the *Azad*, a daily newspaper run by conservative Islamists, published a series of broadsides aimed at discrediting the poet, while the *Ittefaq* and *Sangbad*, two prominent progressive newspapers, retaliated and argued for Rabindranath's continual relevance in East Pakistani lives. Khan summarizes the case made by the Islamists thus:

> [Those who would deny Rabindranath a place in the life of the nation and discourage the centenary celebrations argued] Pakistan was a country based on an ideology rooted in the distinct lifestyle, traditions and culture of Indian Muslims. Since Rabindranath was a Hindu/Brahmo he was the bearer of Indian history and heritage. The basis of his philosophy was the *Upanishads*. Consequently, though he could be seen as a major poet he was not relevant to Pakistan. On the contrary, his philosophy was one opposed to the ideology of Pakistan. He would thus have to be rejected. To establish these points these writers resorted to selective quotations from his works used strategically to discredit him [5].

Khan also elaborates on the response of those who were for holding the birth centenary in a fitting manner. To them Rabindranath was central to their identity; in celebrating him, they were celebrating one of the makers of their identity. Significantly, not only did they come up with a series of events that were well attended, they had clearly touched a sympathetic chord in the lives of the people of the province. The net result was a phenomenal increase in interest in Rabindranath's work. Sales of the Viswa Bharati anniversary edition of his collected works, for example, went up considerably. In his excellent personal account of the birth and demise of the Pakistani state in East Bengal, *Pakistaner Janmomritu Darshon* (*A Perspective on the Birth and Death of Pakistan*) Jatin Sarker notes that anniversary events took place even in the remotest parts of the province and not only in the urban centers. He points out that the debate occasioned by the anniversary went way beyond the kind of ideological debate typical of intellectuals and soon took a turn that made Rabindranath immensely popular, indeed, popular in a way he had never been in this part of Bengal. He declares that in the process Rabindranath fueled the Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan that was becoming resurgent by the day in the province (250).

The centenary celebration events of 1961 were followed by a series of initiatives which ensured that the enthusiasm for Rabindranath that had been

unwittingly generated by the official decision to snub his hundredth birth anniversary and the unofficial Islamist attempts to discredit him would surge in successive years. Perhaps the most important of them was the formation of the cultural organization called Chayyanot that year, for it would become the champion of Rabindra Sangeet in this part of Bengal from then onwards. Also, the Bengali department of the University of Dhaka began an annual Bengali Language and Cultural Week in 1963 where his works were prominently featured. As Khan observes, from this period, it was as if "he was being discovered anew; his songs were being sung a lot more; his literary works studied more intensively; and his verse started to appear in posters, placards, banners" of the anti-military and pro-autonomy movement of the province which—not by a coincidence—also began to gather momentum at this time (6). Moreover, festivals such as Pohela Boisakh (Bengali New Year's Day), Basanta Utsav (the Spring Festival), Sharat Utsav (the Autumn Festival), and Borsha Mongol (the welcoming of the monsoons) were now being organized where Rabindra Sangeet, inevitably, dominated. Pohela Boisakh, it should be stressed, has by now become the biggest cultural festival in Bangladesh. And, of course, Rabindranath's birth anniversary has become a regular feature of the cultural calendar in the country. Eventually, his death anniversary in August would also become an annual event for not a few cultural organizations.

Looked at in hindsight, it is obvious that the Pakistani military government's bid to marginalize and even ostracize Rabindranath and its policy of promoting only Muslim writers and downplaying the region's Bengali cultural heritage backfired spectacularly as did its "one-state language" policy. Monem Khan, a crass lawyer chosen by the military dictator of the period, General Ayub Khan, pressed on with such unpopular policies in the years following Rabindranath's centenary anniversary undaunted by popular sentiment. In the process, he succeeded in alienating most East Pakistanis even more. As Schendel observes in his *A History of Bangladesh,* by banning songs by Rabindranath Tagore, the most revered poet, from Radio Pakistan's East Pakistani broadcasts a few years in the 1960s, Khan succeeded only in "reviving the politics of language," that is to say, the spirit of the language movement of the 1950s. Schendel goes on to observe, "Celebrating 21 February or Tagore's birthday, or writing street signs and signboards in Bengali, became popular acts of defiance" at this time (121). As Anisuzzaman, one of Bangladesh's leading intellectuals, observes in his memoirs *Kal Nirobodhi* (*Time Without End*) one can only think of a line from one of Rabindranath's patriotic songs, "Badha Dile Badhbe Lorai ("If you block our way, we will gear up for battle")" to articulate the way the Pakistani bid to obstruct Rabindranath led to the campaign to reinstate him at the heart of Bengali identity formation in East Pakistan and made him an important part of the movement for independence that was now entering its decisive phase.

It should be stressed that the debate over Rabindranath in East Pakistan in the 1960s developed against the backdrop of the autonomy movement spearheaded by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League. Noticeably, the people who were clamoring for autonomy were also the ones celebrating Rabindranath in diverse ways in the decade of his anniversary. On the other hand, those who wanted to

distance him from Pakistan's culture were coming up with overt or covert ways of muting his presence in the lives of the people of the province.

In the second half of the decade, the Pakistani government decided to intervene directly in the debate on two occasions by eliminating Rabindra Sangeet from Bangladesh's airwaves. The first of these interventions took place immediately after the 1965 war between India and Pakistan when it decided to stop broadcasting Rabindranath's songs in its radio stations. This was also the period, we must remember, when the Pakistani government was trying to establish a "Pakistani Bengali literature" and promoting policies such as writing Bengali in an Islamic script. In his book *Purbobonge Rabindranath,* Maksud cites a letter written by the Law Minister of Pakistan, Syed Mohammed Zafar, to General Ayub Khan expressing his fear about Rabindranath's pernicious influence in the province and urging that measures be adopted urgently "to guard the minds of young Bengali Muslims of Pakistan about harmful influence of Rabindranath Tagore as a poet, lyricist, and thinker" (75).

But as soon as the war ended, the Pakistani government was forced to revoke its decision to discourage Tagore's presence in East Pakistan officially in the face of mounting protest against its policies. According to Khan, however, the government's move was nothing more than a "tactical retreat," for the Information Minister, Khawja Shahabuddin, issued a directive once more in 1967 prohibiting performance of Rabindranath's songs on radio and television. Obviously, the Pakistani government had never given up on the idea that this form of music was not in consonance with "national ideals and thinking" (Quoted by Khan, 7). As before, the reaction in East Pakistan was intense. Eighteen leading intellectuals of the province signed a statement protesting the government's decision. This was countered by another statement signed by 40 Islamist intellectuals of the province who felt that claim made by the pro-Rabindranath party that "he was an intrinsic part of the Bengali consciousness" was unacceptable because that would blur the difference between Indian and Pakistani culture (Khan, 8). But the rank of the pro-Rabindranath activists swelled and they issued another statement signed by a large number of his admirers reiterating the view that the poet's work was central to Bengali culture. As Anisuzzaman observes in his lucid account, "Claiming and Disclaiming a Cultural Icon: Tagore in East Pakistan and Bangladesh,"

> The debate so agitated the minds of people throughout East Pakistan that the government soon banned the publication of any other statements on the issue. But they could not prevent meetings and cultural functions from taking place. Abul Hashim, director of the government-funded Islamic Academy, openly took a position against the government's policy and, at the initiative of its secretary, Hasan Hafizur Rahman, the government-backed Writer's Guild in East Pakistan held a five-day celebration of great poets: Michael Madhusudan, Ghalib, Iqbal, and Nazrul Islam. But the celebrations had to start with Tagore (382).

Meanwhile, the Pakistani government's bid to throttle the autonomy movement by putting Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in prison on trumped up charges of sedition also backfired. The result was close to a revolution as the military dictator was forced out of office and Rahman released from jail to receive a hero's welcome.

He now began a vigorous movement for autonomy that gathered tremendous momentum and led to an overwhelming victory for the Awami League in the parliamentary elections held in 1970. The Bengalis of East Pakistan was riding on a nationalist wave and Rabindranath's song "Amar Sonar Bangla" became one of the major sources of inspiration for activists in the penultimate phase of the movement that would lead to the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. To quote Schendel from his *History of Bangladesh*,

> The Awami League, by now largely representing the vernacular elite's aspirations, had captured the vision of the Bengal delta's renewal, autonomy and development in its motto "Shonar Bangla" (Golden Bengal) This motto was cleverly chosen because it was the title of a song that Rabindranath Tagore had written in 1906 and that the Pakistan government had banned. It thus evoked not only the life-giving and beloved motherland but also a defiant Bengaliness: "My Golden Bengal, I love you–forever your skies, your air set my heart in tune as if it were a flute." The song was performed at nationalist meetings and its promise of a glorious future for the Bengal delta fired the imagination of millions during the ill-fated days of united Pakistan (158).

When the Pakistani state strove to crush the movement that year, the song and Rabindranath became even more popular among the Bengalis of the province. It was aired regularly on Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendro, the station setup by the freedom fighters of Bengal, and sung as part of the effort to lift the spirits of the people besieged by the Pakistani occupying forces. No wonder then that soon after Bangladesh became a free country on December 16, 1971 and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman returned triumphantly to the land from which he had been abducted in March of that year, he chose a shortened version of Rabindranath's song as the national anthem of the new republic.

16.4 IV

In the nascent state of Bangladesh, Rabindranath's works became even more popular. His songs were performed in it regularly, his poems recited on all occasions, his plays staged again and again, and his prose writings studied at all levels. An organization called the Rabindra Sangeet Shommolon was formed so that annual festivals of his songs could be held regularly all over the country. Books on him were published in greater numbers and Bangla Academy even published an anthology of poems collected from the works of leading Bangladeshi poets dedicated entirely to him. He was now being read in schools, colleges and universities. The anniversary celebrations became bigger and bigger, and he began to be featured more prominently on all cultural occasions. Radio and television broadcasts of his songs and special programs on his birth and death anniversaries as well as special supplements in newspapers on these days became regular features in the country. Intellectuals like Ahsan who had consciously decided to put Rabindranath aside in order to forge a distinctively Islamist cultural tradition for the Bengalis of East Pakistan now reversed their views and celebrated him once more.

Only the criticism of a handful of left-leaning intellectuals in the 1970s showed that there were still some isolated pockets of resistance to Rabindranath in Bangladesh for ideological reasons. These intellectuals revived the arguments put forward by a few communists in the early 1950s who had found Rabindranath too bourgeoisie in his sensibility and a negative model for those aspiring to be revolutionaries. Most of them had changed their position during the movement that led to Bangladesh but in a newly independent country racked with economic problems, some of the arguments they used resurfaced and were even picked up by the Islamists to discredit him as a poet who had come out of a feudal background and whose privileged life was a sure indication that his poetry was remote from the concerns of the great majority of the people of Bengal. Representative of this view was Dr. Ahmed Sharif, a professor of Bengali at the University of Dhaka, but as Anisuzzaman indicates in his survey of the controversy created by Sharif's remark, the negative views were drowned by the protests of others who stressed how jaundiced they were (Anisuzzaman, 384–385). It was clear that intellectuals like Sharif constituted a tiny minority and their reservations about Tagore did not dislodge Rabindranath in any noticeable way from the central position he had assumed in Bangladeshi culture by the time Bangladesh was liberated.

In fact, it was not until the period of military dictatorships that began in 1975 after Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated and when the group that Schendel called the "establishment nationalists" was in disarray and the "Islamists" ascendant in the country's administration that one could detect more effective bids to discredit Rabindranath for one reason or the other in Bangladesh. General Ziaur Rahman, the military dictator who ruled Bangladesh for almost 6 years after the series of coups and counter-coups that followed Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's assassination, took some Islamists on board in his administration and the cultural politics of the government tilted at least a little away from Tagore. The tactics the "Islamists" adopted had to be quite subtle though because of the love for Rabindranath in the country. But a tendency to play off Nazrul against Tagore can be discerned in any scrutiny of the official cultural policy of the period. Every now and then too an Islamist ideologue patronized by the administration would remark publicly that it was unfortunate that "Amar Shonar Bangla" was the national anthem of the country. Thus, Aftab Ahmed, a professor of political science at Dhaka University linked to the BNP formed by General Rahman, argued that "a song composed during the agitation over the partition of Bengal in colonial British India cannot reflect the aspirations of our Bangladesh people" ("Claiming and Disclaiming…," Anisuzzaman, 66). People of his ilk also argued that it was unfortunate that no one from Bangladesh was thought fit to be the author of its national anthem. Still others used the tactics of selective quotations or extracts from Rabindranath's works presented out of context to color the poet as ideologically inimical to the Muslims of Bangladesh. In his *A History of Bangladesh* Schendel suggests that to the "establishment nationalists" it now appeared that General Rahman had not only revived the Islamist agenda but also managed to attract a new generation of politicians "on whom the romance of Bengali literature, the subtleties of Tagore songs and the finer things in life were completely lost" ("Who Speaks…," 252).

General Ziaur Rahman was assassinated in 1981. The new military dictator, General H.M. Ershad, followed a policy in which he tried to be all things to all men and women and so in the 1980s Bangladesh saw on the one hand widespread enthusiasm for Rabindranath displayed by what Schendel called the “renewal nationalists” and on the other a subtle and subterranean campaign undertaken by those who would like to discourage government patronage of Rabindranath. As long as he was in power, General Ershad would not discourage official celebrations of Rabindranath’s anniversaries but would not miss the opportunity to keep the Islamists happy in matters of cultural policy of giving the poet too much attention.

When democracy returned to Bangladesh in the 1990s, the country began to alternate between Islamist and “renewal nationalist” governments, that is to say, between the BNP and the Awami League. Although it is certainly not the case that Rabindranath was cast aside by the BNP when it was in power, the state had taken much less interest in him when this party was at the helm of the administration, as it was in 1991–1996 and 2001–2006. No doubt because the BNP ruled with either the tacit or explicit support of Islamist parties, fundamentalists were more visible and aggressive at the time of BNP governments. On the other hand, organizations which were associated with linguistic nationalism and promoted Rabindra Sangeet felt at a disadvantage at this period. It is not surprising, then, that in 2001 Bangladeshis witnessed on live television the carnage that resulted when bombs were blasted at the Pohela Boisakh function organized by Chayyanot where Rabindranath’s songs are prominently featured. Evidently, some extreme fundamentalist organization had felt that the state security apparatus would be lax enough for them to hurl explosives at the cultural event that not only heralded the Bengali New Year but also gave center stage to Rabindranath—both anathema to them.

In the long introductory essay Sanjida Khatun wrote for the book that records the progress of Chayyanot as a cultural organization, *Stir Protoyer Jatra* (*A Resolute Journey*), we come to learn about this incident as well as the obstacles the organization had to face when it wanted to move to its own premises in Dhaka in 2002. Obviously, the BNP government was bent on dragging its foot to discourage the institution that is most closely associated with the teaching of Rabindra Sangeet in Bangladesh from rooting itself permanently in Dhaka. It delayed approving the design of the institution or rejected the design submitted till Chayyanot and its supporters went public on the issue in 2004 to force the government to do something. Ultimately, the BNP government approved the design and the institution was able to open its doors in its permanent premise in November 2006. Clearly, this government was not prepared to go beyond a point in discouraging Chayyanot or ignoring Rabindranath although it did what it could to discourage the institution. For sure, by the turn of the millennium, Rabindranath had become well lodged in the nation’s consciousness and even a pro-Islamist government like the BNP was not willing to go back to the kind of anti-Rabindranath policies that had created such a furore in the 1960s in Pakistan. It was one thing to adopt a “go-slow” policy in approving Chayanot’s plans but it was another thing to be perceived as the party discrediting the poet or his supporters forcefully.

Outside the country, though, a group of Islamist intellectuals from Bangladesh have been resorting to the net to renew the kind of attacks on the poet that had been a feature of the 1960s in Pakistan. Some of these attacks and critiques of them can be found in the Web site www.mukto-mona.com. Representative of those who are still out to oust Rabindranath from contemporary Bangladesh is the expatriate Bangladeshi scholar Taj Hashmi who polemically begins his May 11, 2006 posting "The Tagore Mania: Identity Crisis and Anti-Bangladesh Syndrome" by firing a salvo at those who were cultivating the poet's writing in the country. Decrying what he calls "India–Bhakta Tagorites of the country", he declares in mock-amazement: "do give me a break; one who died in 1941 at 80 should be still regarded as the most relevant poet, essayist, novelist and lyricist."

There is no need to go over Hashmi's polemical attack on those who are perpetuating Rabindranath's legacy in Bangladesh in this paper because they mostly rehash objections against the poet raised in a previous era. However, a resolute answer to Hashmi and others like him who have resorted to the net to discredit him can be found in the essay titled "A Herald of Religious Unity: Rabindranath Tagore's Literary Representations of Muslims" by Mohammad A. Quayum, also an expatriate Bangladeshi scholar like them, published in a 2007 number of the American journal *South Asian Review.* Quyaum links the "recent attacks on the iconic Bengali poet by a group of ultra-Muslim cyber critics", accusing Rabindranath "of Hindu chauvinism and willful attempts, both in his life and works, to establish the supremacy of Hindus and Muslims in an undivided India." To Quayum, this is an example of the "net of extremism and religious jingoism" being spread by fundamentalists in the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere (100). Quyaum stresses that people like Hashmi "have an agenda in mind, a twisted axe to grind" (101). All of these Bangladeshi cyber critics of the poet, he observes, cannot swallow the fact that the national anthem was composed by someone who was not a Muslim. He then goes on to document what a Rabindranath scholar would know, but what surely is worth reestablishing through documentation, "that Tagore was never a communal thinker and that he never sought wittingly to subvert or humiliate the Muslims": and that, on the contrary, "he was impelled by a global and humanitarian outlook, and he devoted his life to the creation of a united India (alas, a united world!) through the cultivation of a spirit of dialogue and co-existence" (102).

So was Rabindranath against the formation of the University of Dhaka because of Hindu chauvinistic beliefs, as my colleague insinuated in her speech at the D.U. senate in June of this year? I certainly have found no evidence of that yet. Was he against the partition of Bengal? He certainly was, but he was as Bengali as anyone ever was, and how could a Bengali endorse the bifurcation of his country? Also, when he found how excessive and dangerous the partition zealots could be and how the *swadeshi* movement was endangering Hindu–Muslim relations, he distanced himself from the movement. Is there any Rabindranath bashing in Bangladesh nowadays? Rarely and very obliquely, it must be said. Has he been crucial to national identity formation in Bangladesh? Definitely so, we can assert. He has been able to galvanize the movement that had been sparked off by the language movement of the 1950s and has been inspirational for the cultural resistance

that was at the core of the national liberation struggle of Bangladesh. What role has he played in the national imaginary? The answer surely must be sought in the image of repossessing *Shonar Bangla* that his song focalized for the generation that fought the liberation war and are still striving to make the vision generated by it come true.

I would like to conclude exultantly, as befits this occasion. 2010s celebration of Rabindranath's anniversary in Bangladesh has been more festive than any of the previous occasions I can recall. The celebration in the next few years will surely be even grander. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh signed a pact with the Indian government in 2010 to the effect that not only would her country celebrate Tagore's sesquicentenary in a befitting manner, the two countries would work together to continue the celebration of Rabindranath's life and works till the Nobel Prize anniversary is commemorated in 2013. But the price of truth is eternal vigilance, and official policy is never enough; there will no doubt be isolated attempts by fundamentalists and people who hold on to the vestiges of the ideology that created Pakistan to take potshots at him in the Hashmi style. To be sure, every once in a while someone will recirculate a canard or will attack the poet on the net as the cyber critics and atavistic Islamists like my D. U. senate colleagues have done precisely because he is wildly loved and by now firmly planted in the national consciousness. But to show how central Rabindranath is to the rest of us Bangladeshis, let me end with these tributes to him by two of our foremost poets, the late Shamsur Rahman and Rafiq Azad, both rendered here in my translations.

To Rabindranath

People say poetry has fallen on hard times in Bangladesh. In particular, since you died the muse herself has lost

All loveliness and grace. Only ruggedness and obscurity

Surround it now. All around it one sees wastelands.

Why the hungry mouse is startled by moonlight on the skull

The flower of the cactuscan in no way comprehend.

Sudhindra and Jibanananda are dead; Buddhadev seeks solace

In translations. Samar and Subash are mere echoes

In memory's corridors now. Some others have survived
Storms and floods and have ascended to secure thrones,
Although those who have recently taken up helm and scull
On flowing rivers have been unseasonably stranded

On sandbanks all of a sudden. And those who love flowers

Have settled on putrid ones to celebrate spring.
Like newly planted seedlings needing sun and rain

We too needed celestial succor all lifelong.

Your brilliance illuminated our sun seeking consciousness, Irradiated our talk of politics, our loving.

As if in princely eminence–*when on midday*
Birds ceased to sing–you never heaved a sigh.

As if Bolpur's blazing summer didn't tire you out

Or in a parched voice you never cried out for water–
As if the death of your beloved son Shomeer

Didn't dim the fire in your bosom–or the bewitching
Always elusive mythical deer didn't delude you ever–
You were always an imposing figure for countless souls!

Though the rose's sharp thorns pierced the azure of Rilke's being;
He had his bath at midday and lunch too; his hair had felt

The touch of a comb; his heart too was devoted to a woman.

You have given my days the glow of poetry

My nights you have filled with the sparkle of songs.
All my lifelong you've given me the magic spell

I needed to burst through the formidable phalanx
Of the fabled seven charioteers.
You've given me
The assurance to shatter the barbarian's outburst
With the drill of my intense indignation.

You've emboldened me to walk the open road of symbols

And to enter the fields of joy and the wide world.
You've swept past the avowed atheist's secure defenses
With such pure lyrics of devotion and god's love.

I'd rather not wade in waters where toads croak;
I want to be part of the immense ocean. In trying
To soar like you I may keep falling into the mud;
Nonetheless, I console myself: being the cuckoo
Of the mudflat will give my life some meaning!
—*Shamsur Rahman*

My Rabindranath is Relevant To This Day
(Amar Rabindranath Ajo Prasangik)

He's the air we breathe—the green engulfing Bengal;
He's with us a lot, always, in sorrow or happiness.

In personal setbacks, in our collective crises.

He forever guards—caresses—inspires us to be dauntless.

He was born in frightfully hot Boisakh and died in Sravan,
Summer and monsoon—distinctive Bengali seasons—

A fact that strikes one now as of immense significance.
I sing full-throated his all-conquering songs—

His music's nectar nurtures me, moistens my soul.

In every step I take every day in the world's path I feel him.
He's always relevant to me as I seek enlightenment

He gives me strength and courage in my unhappy moments.
His songs flow compassionately—full of enduring truths.

To soothe my bruised soul I submit myself to his care.
Whether individually or collectively he is dear to us all.
Till this day I haven't met anyone who isn't indebted

To him—directly or indirectly!
—Rafiq Azad

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Chapter 17
Tagore Through Portraits: An Intersubjective Picture Gallery

Debashish Banerji

Abstract This essay deals with subject formation as a dynamic negotiation between self, community, and the public space of modernity. The ideological mythologies which structure the public space of the modern nation are reflected in processes of self-identification at the individual level. This relation can be mediated by the intersubjective space of the postmodern community, not a community based on blood or ideology, but on a shared condition of experience which can be called "human," in the species sense of the term. The paper deals with Tagore's home community of Jorasanko as such an affective space of creative mutuality, where a foundational fraternity could ground critique and enable reflection and reinvention of the self in its dynamic relation to the forces of modernity. By looking at the visual language of exchanges coded into portraits of Rabindranath made his nephews Gaganendranath and Abanindranath, I try to trace the locus of this intersubjective space as the amorphous domain of the poet's mutating self-identification.

Keywords Identity politics · Modernity · Nationalism · Visual studies · Jorasanko

As India and the world celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of the famed poet Rabindranath Tagore, it may be appropriate to consider the impact of his personality in his own time. We think of Rabindranath mainly as a poet, but he was far more—a mystic, dramatist, artist, music composer, educationist, social reformer, political thinker, and community builder, the epic scope of his life perhaps most centrally describable as the conscience of an age. Rabindranath was born in a period of the ascendance of colonialism and his life spanned the time of the rise of colonized nations (including his own) toward cultural and political independence, and the struggle of dominant nations for supremacy over the world. Attuned to the power of technology, nationalism, and capitalism to fashion modern subjects and

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monopolize a world, he sought to safeguard a possibility of spiritual humanism through a call for transcultural and cosmic engagements leading toward universality. Such an evolution of personality was sought by Rabindranath along the twin axes of the home and the world, or the communitarian domain of intimate intersubjectivity and the public domain of transcultural politics.

The persona engaging the latter, his public façade, is what was and is more universally known, even among those who knew him in the ashram community at Shantiniketan, a fact not in little part due to his larger than life self-presentation, a personality summing in himself a world possibility. In retrospect, such a quasi-cosmic power of personality had its historic moment at the transnational cusp between the early 20th c. rise of alternative nationalisms and the mid-20th c. collapse of idealism in the ravages of two world wars. It is hardly possible in our day and age of anonymized subjects engaged in the micropolitics of worlding. But this memorable iconicity, lending itself so attractively to capture in photographs and portraits, was itself hardly what it is taken so often to be, a "natural" or "organic" expression of cosmic agency. Rather, it evidences Rabindranath's vital intuition of modernity as what Martin Heidegger, a contemporary, called "the age of the world picture" (115–154). Our age is properly an age of the world picture for at least two reasons well understood by Rabindranath: (1) It is a historically unprecedented epoch marked by the drive to homogenize world history and global culture in the name of humanity; (2) it is an age marked by the increasing dominance of "the picture" in a global becoming, the politics of the image, an optical politics. Sensitive to this mediation, the message/massage of social media, Rabindranath fashioned himself using dress, hair, headdress, posture, and gait, semiotically occupying the twilight zone between world cultures of shamanism, sagacity, and statesmanship.

But if this well-known figure of the transnational philosopher-sage in a historical moment sympathetic to Orientalism and guru English is what remains to be celebrated in the picture book of world history, there is another locus of identity where dialogic fragments of intimacy draw the forces of global politics to the homecoming of local affect. The icon becomes malleable and vulnerable to splintering and distortion, a play of unfinished selves tests/tastes the communitarian truth of cosmicity. My consideration here is of this nature, a picture gallery of Rabindranath fashioned in his familial habitus of Jorasanko, not as iconic representation, but as interpretive conversation, a continuing intersubjective improvisation. Here, one can note that if the increasingly global public domain of modernity establishes the politics of its ubiquitous virtuality in the optical register, the marginal and subjugated senses of touch, taste, smell, and orality dominate the intimate domain of effervescent flow and becoming, which nevertheless leaves its unauthored and unauthorized inscription in time. However, here too, the image has its mediation, more usually through one-way seepage in a didactic pedagogy of discursive subjection, but sometimes also, with greater agency, in a critical and creative circulation which provokes and stimulates new resources and responses of becoming. The Tagore household at Jorasanko provided the ground for this second economy of images, due to the uncommon sharing of artistic interest and facility within that habitus.

17.1 Jorasanko

The Jorasanko Tagore house was divided both residentially and religion-wise into two, Nos. 5 and 6 Dwarkanath Tagore Lane. No. 6 housed the Brahmo section of the family, consisting of the lineage of Debendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's father; while No. 5 housed the Hindu section, the descendents of one of Debendranath's brothers, Girindranath. A number of members of both these households were painters of more than average talent, and several have left their mark in the history of Indian art (Mitra 1991: 261–62). The exchange of portraits within this milieu can be seen as a nuanced conversation in which messages of a subtlety and ambiguity beyond language could be shared, carrying a fluid transformative potential on agency within the intersubjective medium. Of course, this is not to discount hierarchical lines of patriarchy which structured Indian extended families, but to bring to light a liminal economy of relational exchanges, perhaps facilitated by the jurisdictional uncertainty of the space-time occupied by the Jorasanko habitus from the 1890s to the 1940s, an unpredictable and creative discourse partly mediated by portraits. It is this subjectivation through portraits which I wish to consider here, in the life of Rabindranath Tagore in the intimate intersubjective milieu of Jorasanko. Of the artists of Jorasanko, it is particularly two nephews of Rabindranath from the "other house," the brothers Gaganendranath and Abanindranath, who participated most actively in this subtle economy of portraits of their uncle, who they took in many ways as a role model, but not beyond banter and critique. It is a few of these portraits and the open-ended language coded in them that form the subject of this essay.

17.2 Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

It is to Rabindranath's elder brother Jyotirindranath, in 1877, that we owe the earliest pencil sketches of the poet as a young adolescent. A copy of one of these portraits of the poet aged 16 was later made by Gaganendranath (Fig. 17.1). Rabindranath was hardly known outside the family at this time, though he had started writing poetry. 1877 marks a watershed year in the life of Rabindranath and the Jorasanko milieu in which he lived, signifying the entry of both into the wider "public" domain of regional subject formation through the cultural politics of what has been called the Bengal Renaissance—since this year saw the launching of the Jorasanko house journal *Bharati* by Rabindranath's brothers and the pseudonymous publication in that journal of his first poems, titled *Bhanusingher Padabali* (Tagore 1917: 135–38). The portrait shows a young adult with sensitive features and dreamy eyes.

This image of the dreamy and imaginative poet is reinforced in another sketch from c. 1894, this time by Abanindranath. This sketch shows us the poet in profile as a young man seated on a deckchair facing the waters of the Ganga at Monghyr (Fig. 17.2). Rabindranath by this time had a number of plays and books of poems under his belt and had gained prominence as a writer in the literary circles of



Fig. 17.1 Sketch of Rabindranath by Gaganendranath Tagore (copied from Jyotirindranath)

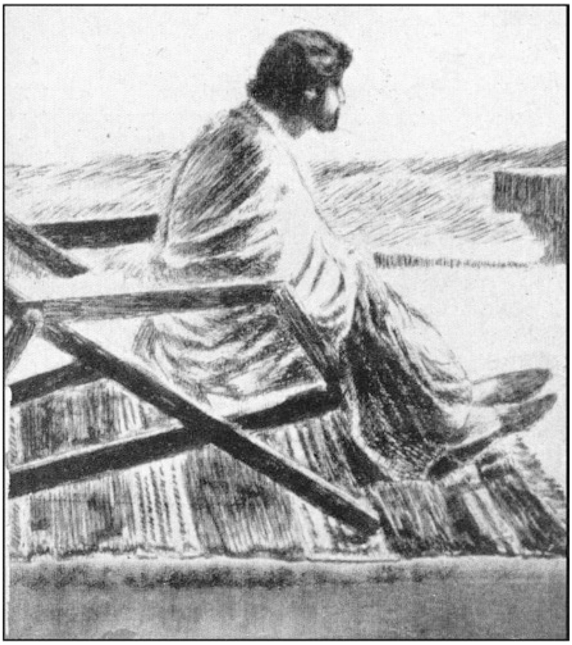


Fig. 17.2 Sketch of Rabindranath at Monghyr by Abanindranath Tagore, c. 1894



Fig. 17.3 Portrait of Rabindranath (oil pastels) by Abanindranath Tagore, c. 1894

Bengal. He had also paid his first two visits to England, the last (in 1890) shortly before this painting. The sketch, by depicting the poet as a hatched form in profile gazing out over the water, highlights the romantic imagination, the national subject immersed in the *bhava* of *kavya*, a dream of spatial and temporal distances with the swelling waters of the Ganga providing a hint of the rich cultural imaginary at his disposal. Shortly after, Abanindranath painted one of his most striking portraits in oil pastel, a close-up three-quarter profile of the poet (Fig. 17.3). The sensitive serious face with well-groomed hair, trimmed beard and mustache, and a fashionable *pince-nez* is the quintessential portrait of the artist as a young man. But what is noteworthy is the European modality of the work. Abanindranath's studies in pastels around this time under the Italian Olinto Ghilardi, find fruition here (Mitter 1994: 275), just as the European styling of Rabindranath is evident. Unlike the *kavya* poet in an Indian setting, what we have here is the *ingabanga* hybrid subject of the Bengal Renaissance, engaged in the cross-cultural hermeneutics of fashioning a new international identity for the emerging nation. Rabindranath at this time was an admirer of the hybrid naturalism of Ravi Verma and is likely to have been pleased by this portrait. Much later, in his reminiscences, Abanindranath tells a

possibly apocryphal story about Ravi Verma's visit to Jorasanko, where he was shown this portrait by Rabindranath and remarked on its fineness. With this story, Abanindranath appropriated for himself the mantle of Ravi Verma's successor in the field of portrait painting (Tagore 1979 AR 1: 301–02).

17.3 Poet and Mystic

If the first painting marks a transaction between the local and the regional spheres and the next two mark the transition from a regional to a national discourse of subjectivity, the next set of portraits, again by Abanindranath in the years 1916–1917, follow the emergence of the world personality. The portraits in question arose directly from the 1916 staging of Rabindranath's play *Phalguni* (English translation: *Cycle of Spring*) at Jorasanko (R. Tagore RR 6: 470-01). All three nephews of the No. 5 residence played parts in the play. Rabindranath himself enacted two roles, that of a poet (*kabishekhar*) and a *baul* mystic. Gaganendranath acted as a king, Samarendranath acted as his minister, and Abanindranath acted as the learned priest (*sruti bhushan*) (Fig. 17.4). The subtext of the play concerned the



Fig. 17.4 From *left* to *right*: Samarendranath, Gaganendranath, and Abanindranath acting in Phalguni (1916)

struggle between religious orthodoxy and heterodoxy, a theme often repeated in Rabindranath's writings. As with the genre of self-portraits, Rabindranath's literary parallels such as pseudonyms and self-enacted dramatic roles may be thought of as representations or self-interpretations for personal and public reflection, engagement, and consumption. Abanindranath's portraits of Rabindranath from this period feature him in his roles in *Phalguni*, as the court poet and the mystic.

Undoubtedly, the most significant event in the life of Rabindranath, in the years between 1894 and 1916, was the awarding of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. But other events of a less public nature had shaken the poet during this period and left perhaps deeper imprints on his subjective topography. A string of close bereavements, those of his father, wife, and three of his five children, had left him emotionally vacated. Rabindranath spent much of the 1890s managing the family estates at Shilaidaha in Kushtia district (now in Bangladesh). Around this time, he is supposed to have come into contact with the famous *baul* songwriter Fakir Lalon Shah. There are no obvious records of this encounter, but Jnadanandini, his brother Satyendranath's wife, spoke of several meetings with the mystic and Jyotirindranath, another brother, has left a sketch of Lalon as a blind old man, seated on a chair with a stick in hand (Chakrabarti 2004: 106–112). Lalon lived within the *zamindari* of the Tagores in Kushtia and died aged close to

Fig. 17.5 Rabindranath as Kabishekhar in Phalguni, (watercolor) by Abanindranath Tagore (1916)



a hundred and twenty in 1890. Rabindranath's poems and other writings since the 1890s showed the influence of *baul* ideas and imagery, as represented in Lalon's songs. From 1901, Rabindranath applied himself increasingly to the development of his ashram and educational community in Shantiniketan and sought out the *bauls* of Birbhum.

Rabindranath participated actively in the *swadeshi* movement of 1905–1908, following the partition of Bengal in 1905, but distanced himself from the movement toward the end, due to his disillusionment with hypocrisy, political expediency, and manipulation. In 1915, he articulated his response to the movement in his novel *Ghare Baire*. This disillusionment left him more focused on his writing and his Shantiniketan experiment. In 1910–1911, the British artist and critic William Rothenstein, who came to Jorasanko to visit Abanindranath, was introduced to Rabindranath. Rothenstein was deeply stirred by the mystical beauty of Rabindranath's personality and made six sketches, marked by their unostentatious presentation of the poet as a pan-Asiatic spiritual contemplative, his long beard reminiscent of Chinese sages, his flowing robes evoking Persian/Sufi mystics and his features and sitting posture those of an Indian yogi (Datta and Robinson 1996: 160). The next year Rabindranath traveled to England, where he met Rothenstein once more and showed him the manuscript of his English translations of *Gitanjali*.



Fig. 17.6 Rabindranath as baul with khanjani (watercolor) Tagore (1917)

As is well known, the publicizing of the poet through Rothenstein's influential circles led to the award of the Nobel Prize in December 1913, the first non-European to receive the award. For the following months, he rode the crest of success, but by May 1914, this had collapsed to a deep depression, a distaste for institutions and public adulation and a sense of personal failure (Datta and Robinson 1996: 194–95). Plunging him into deeper darkness, the first World War began from June of that year. Rabindranath confessed his borderline suicidal state in a letter to his son:

> I felt I had not achieved anything, I wouldn't be able to do anything—my entire life was useless—I had no confidence or trust in anyone. My conscience was pricking me for not performing my duties to my school, zamindari, family and country (quoted in Datta and Robinson 1996: 194–95).

One may consider *Phalguni* (*The Cycle of Spring*) of 1916 to be the poet's recovery from this winter of his discontent. Abanindranath captures the dual personae of the poet in his portraits of this period—*kabishekhar*, the institutionally adulated poet, within an establishment dominated by state laws symbolized by the king and the minister and religious orthodoxy embodied by the priest; and *baul*, the heterodox mystic, free of the state and unpredictable as the moods of nature. Abanindranath has one painting of the poet (Fig. 17.5) and three of the *baul*



Fig. 17.7 Rabindranath as baul with ektara (watercolor) Abanindranath Tagore (1916)

(Figs. 17.6, 17.7 and 17.8). Clearly, this establishes a recognition of the social entrapment of the poet within the ubiquitous construct of modernity and its normative structures, whether national or international, and cultural resources of interiority to find a vantage of autonomy from which to respond within the process of subjectivation. The *baul's* discontinuity and independence from the poet and his world is marked by his blindness, a veiled reference to Lalon but also to a Heideggerian being-towards-death, the limit condition of the Unknowable (Heidegger 1962: 247–74). Or to adapt the terminology of the Gita, more familiar to the Tagores, the poet and the baul represented, respectively, the *kshara* and *akshara purushas*, the first trapped within the mutations of nature, the second eternally free and able to sustain the first (VIII: 3–4). Thus, in these portraits, Abanindranath was responding to his uncle's symbolic self-presentation and



Fig. 17.8 Rabindranath as baul dancing with ektara (watercolor) Abanindranath Tagore (1916)

highlighting his newly acquired powers of reinvention. The three paintings of the *baul* are instructive in this respect. They represent three levels of dynamism in the expression of the heterodox mystic—serene and devotional, playing the cymbals (*khanjani*) (Fig. 17.6); deeply withdrawn, as in prophetic articulation, voicing himself through his *ektara* (Fig. 17.7); and unpredictably ecstatic with the madness of Dionysian creativity, dancing with the *ektara* lifted (Fig. 17.8). It is notable that the introduction of this trope of blindness would be something that Abanindranath would use to varied effect in his intersubjective representation of Rabindranath, but one which he isolated as emerging as a necessary double of the poet from this point.

17.4 Performative Economy of the Icon

The return to public activity by Rabindranath in this period coincided with new experiments in painting being conducted by Gaganendranath, which he used to telling effect in a portrait of his uncle. The Indian National Congress held its annual meeting in Calcutta in December 1917 with Annie Besant as President and Rabindranath read out a nationalist poem to the gathering of 12,000 attendees (Ghosh 2006: 210–12). Prior to this, Gaganendranath had painted in the flat ink and brush *sumi-e* style (Mitter 1994: 97). From 1917, he began adapting this style to explore the psychological power of projected light and theatrical space. Gaganendranath had an active interest in stage setting and often participated in designing sets for Rabindranath's plays. In this portrait, he captures the poet in silhouette from behind, distinguished by his flowing robe and cap (Fig. 17.9) (Mitter 1994: 103, 175). He appears in stark contrast against a slanting beam of light from above, a multitude of dots evoking the sea of humanity (*janasamudra*) before him.

This reduction of poet to messianic icon and audience to anonymous specks of consciousness reverses the new technologies of colonial control and portends an era of worldwide manipulative politics using powerful and ubiquitous technologies of audiovisual staging to inscribe a hypnotic virtuality onto reality. The duplicity of this condition should not be lost sight of. Just as Abanindranath's earlier set of portraits acknowledges a dual subject, the split into the poet and the mystic/shaman, Gaganendranath's image develops the iconic signifier, oneirically established in the cultural imaginary through techno-theater and generating its own fixated collective life against the life of the individual. Rabindranath was not oblivious to this political potency and had traveled to Japan and the USA in 1916 during the war, speaking against the power of national and other ideological rhetoric to turn people against one another in the name of an abstract cause. But what Rabindranath's participation in Indian national politics and Gaganendranath's image also acknowledge here is the necessity of an equally powerful counter-rhetoric in the emerging national/global war of images—here the world poet invoking soul powers in a participative polity in the comity of nations. But the iconic persona which makes its appearance in this painting was here to stay and reappears through various references in later portraits by the nephews.



Fig. 17.9 Rabindranath reciting India's prayer at Indian national congress, (ink on paper) Gaganendranath Tagore (1917)

17.5 The Home and the World

After the war, Rabindranath traveled once more to the USA and Europe to seek funds for financing his world university, Viswa-Bharati in Shantiniketan. In April 1921, he traveled from London to Paris by plane, his first flight (Datta and Robinson 1996: 231). Since 1917, Gaganendranath had also taken to painting expressionistic cartoons on social themes. Exemplifying the dialectic between the local and the transnational, he painted a cartoon of Rabindranath in a flying chair in the sky, holding on to his cap with the crescent moon behind and star clusters around him and his books fluttering alongside like birds (Fig. 17.10). Once again, identified by his beard, robe, cap and *ektara*, and backgrounded by the crescent



Fig. 17.10 Rabindranath flying, cartoon lithograph by Gaganendranath Tagore (1921)

and stars, Gaganendranath's portrait evokes the heterodox *baul/fakir* mystic, transposed culturally to west Asia through the implied reference of the magic carpet and modernized through the chair. The brothers Gaganendranath and Abanindranath seldom traveled outside Jorasanko and never left India. Yet they were intellectually connected with the world through international correspondents and visitors and engaged actively in a transnational discursive exchange. Gaganendranath's cartoon was made after the residents of Jorasanko viewed a documentary which included scenes of Rabindranath's flight. This painting was shown to a staff member of No. 6 Dwarkanath Tagore Lane, Rabindranath's residence, who was coaxed to comment on it and came up with the description: "*Babamoshay udchen*" (The patriarch is flying) (Gangopadhyay 1990: 84–85). The idiomatic connotations of this phrase in Bengali include fringe and eccentric activities bordering on lunacy (another valency of the crescent moon behind the poet's head in the portrait). The comment provoked much amusement among the residents of No. 5, bringing into the open the edge of laughter they felt toward the far flung interests and repeated trips abroad of their "elder," Rabindranath.

An analogous visual comment from Abanindranath relates to the same trip to the west by Rabindranath. Upon the poet's return, he urged his younger nephew to visit Europe (Choudhury 1973: 95). In response, Abanindranath produced a postcard painting in which we see a ship sailing away and the back of a man seated on a chair watching it, with a brush or the pipe-end of a hookah in his right hand, from what appears to be the deck of another ship (Fig. 17.11). The inscription



Fig. 17.11 Abanindranath watches the departure of S.S. Toshamaru from the deck of his south-facing veranda, (postcard in ink and slight color) Abanindranath Tagore, 1921

in ink on the right margin reads: *SS Toshamaru as seen from the deck of B.I.S.N. Dhunwa Maru. Iti Srutibhusanam*. The last few words, from *Dhunwa Maru* on are written in Bengali, indicating a hybrid turn from western imitation to subversion. *Tosha Maru* was the name of the ship on which Rabindranath traveled to Japan in 1916. *Dhunwa Maru*, which sounds like the name of another Japanese passenger liner, is Bengali parole for "blowing smoke." *Srutibhusan*, as mentioned above, was the role enacted by Abanindranath in the 1916 staging of *Phalguni*. Here, we find a continuation of the vein of amusement at Rabindranath's voyages abroad, privileging over these the voyages of the imagination conducted by Abanindranath while seated at the deck of his south-facing veranda, with the *hookah* replacing the steamship's chimney (Banerji 2010: 101–02).

17.6 Gestating Masks

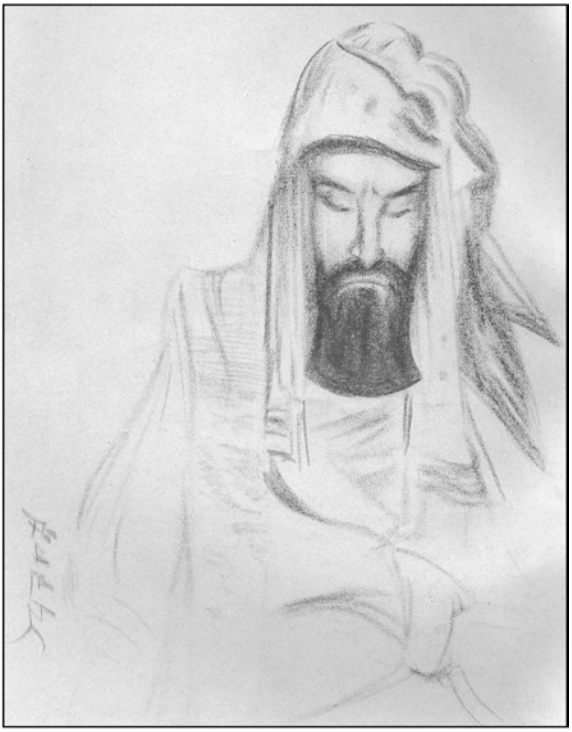
From 1929, Abanindranath embarked upon a new approach to portraiture, which he termed "Mask Drawings." This approach began with his painting of stage characters from Rabindranath's play *Tapati* (1929), linking this practice once more to the performative domain of alterity and intersubjective subject constitution. A grandson, Mohonlal Gangopadhyay writes in his remembrances of life at Jorasanko that while working on a spate of portraits in the late 1920s, Abanindranth commented

that he could see a “mask” that people wore just under the skin (63). He then proceeded to paint 60–70 “mask” portraits of members of the extended community of Jorasanko—relatives, friends, servants, visitors. But though this statement provides an impression of “inner objectivity” to the masks, and though these “portraits” bear some resemblance to the person referenced, a considerable stretching of objectivity is evident, deliberately investing the face with deviant cultural, psychological, and/or material properties so as to renominate it.

Rabindranath played the part of King Bikram in *Tapati* and Abanindranath utilized this role as a starting point to explore once more a persona of the poet. Initially, he produced a pencil sketch of the character as he saw it. The king is shown with a gaunt black-bearded face, his head and ears covered with a cloth, his eyes closed, and his face wearing a frown (Fig. 17.12). The closed eyes in the painting refer to Bikram’s blindness—not physical blindness but the blindness of self-willed obstinacy in the face of injustice, prudence, and worldly wisdom. Abanindranath continued his elaboration of this persona by painting two masks, which extended the resemblance (Figs. 17.13 and 17.14). He thus reiterated his 1916 reference to blindness in his characterization of Rabindranath.

But if the 1916 portrait of Rabindranath as a blind *baul* caught the unpredictable freedom of the heterodox mystic in him, this set of portraits captures a radically contrary persona—it shows a narrow head with an aquiline nose, covered

Fig. 17.12 Sketch of Rabindranath as king Bikram from Tapati by Abanindranath Tagore, 1929



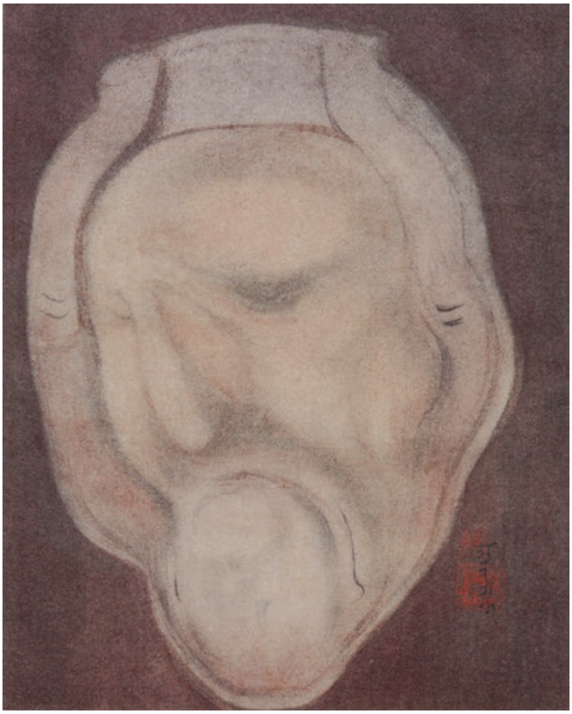


Fig. 17.13 Three-quarter mask of Rabindranath as king Bikram from Tapati (watercolor) by Abanindranath Tagore, 1929

ears, and closed eyes. The two masks rework these details to deprive the face of ears and eyes. In fact, in both masks, it appears as if the ears are clamped down with alien appendages and the eyes are not merely closed or blind but have been sealed over with skin. In one case, the mask shown in three-quarter profile, the face seems agonized in its distortion, the frowning mouth reduced to a thin crack, the eyes sealed, and what seem like bands of a flesh-like elastic material attached to a cap, obliterating the ears and fused at the cheeks (Fig. 17.13).

In the other mask, displayed in profile view, the transformation seems complete. What appears now, from its texture, to be a cut piece of white cloth or rubber is pasted over the back part of the head, replacing the hair and sideburns, pulled tightly over the head like a cowl and resembling at the same time, the shape of an ancient Greek or Trojan helmet (Fig. 17.14). There is no ear or if there is, it is entirely closed by the white cut piece. Extending downward in a straight line below the nose and widening through a couple of abrupt jagged cuts to connect with the larger white shape is a smaller independent cutout of the same color and material as the larger one, forming what must be the mustache and beard. This shape completely swallows up the mouth (or as with the other sense organs, perhaps there is no mouth). A closer inspection of this smaller shape shows it to be a silhouette likeness of the full body profile of Rabindranath, as in the by now well-recognized iconic photograph, walking in his flowing robe with his hands behind his back and a stoop to his capped head and shoulders.



Fig. 17.14 Profile mask of Rabindranath as king Bikram from Tapati (watercolor) by Abanindranath Tagore, 1929

The narrow face with the cowled head, straight lines, and the absent sense organs gives a strong impression of rigid abstemious orthodoxy or a stubborn adherence to his own ideas, blind to world opinion. While it is not clear if this depiction was occasioned by something personal to the relationship between Rabindranath and Abanindrnath, it is known that the late 1920s had been a hard time for the poet, as he had, indeed stubbornly stuck to his ideas regarding the expansion of Viswa-Bharati as also his resistance to various aspects of Gandhian nationalism against widespread criticism from friends and foes. So much so, that on December 22, 1929, the Founder's Day for Viswa-Bharati, he sent a card out to his friends and acquaintances across the world with a handwritten message: "My salutations to him who knows me imperfect and loves me" (Datta and Robinbson 1996: 286).

Indeed, as we gaze at Abanindranath's image, its hard narrowness reveals another dimension. The quasi-Grecian helmet-like shape combined with the eyelessness brings to mind the long tradition of blind Greek prophets, as evocatively described by Milton in *Paradise Lost*:

Blind THAMYRIS and blind MAEONIDES, And
TIRESIAS and PHINEUS Prophets old (Milton III: 145).

In this passage, the blind poet Milton is calling witness to a great tradition of blind poets and prophets—Maeonides, who is Homer, the arch-poet of the "Western tradition" along with the prophets Thamyris, Tiresias, and Phineus, so as to invoke all the more powerfully the light of God to shine inwardly so he can reveal what no man has seen (Milton 1943: 146). This association also brings to mind the blind Vedic poet Dirghatamas ("Deep Darkness") whose eyes were turned within to know the sourceless Light. In keeping with his status as world poet, these wider resonances now fuse with the persona of the blind *baul* of 1916 and continue to survive within a more ambiguous complexity. The sense deprivation of the monumental regional/national/world poet then becomes a more integral inwardness and perhaps his extraordinary strength—that of the gestation of the cocoon, in its preparation for a transformed and enlightened engagement. Against this background, the stooped walking profile of Rabindranath, fractally constituting his beard (symbol of wisdom, the part containing the whole) in its simplified iconic cut, assumes the mythical proportions of arch-prophet. But still this impotent inwardness carries within itself the pathos that makes, in various ways, social misfits of all these blind prophets, in this case, the most pernicious of all, mouthlessness, the gagging of the oracular fount



Fig. 17.15 Rabindranath Tagore, twelve self-portraits (doodles on a black-and-white photograph)



Fig. 17.16 The funeral procession of Rabindranath Tagore (black-and-white photograph)



Fig. 17.17 The Last Journey of Gurudeb (watercolor) by Abanindranath Tagore (1941)

by the icon of prophecy. Is Abanindranath saying to his uncle, then—O great seer-poet, though awake within today, you are closed to the reality of the outer world and have grown rigid through the inability to bridge the inner and the outer. Is this deep



Fig. 17.18 Robika, Katum-Kutum of Rabindranath by Abanindranath Tagore, c. 1945

inwardness a voluntary turning within, or is it a result of the unreceptive hour or is it a vocal self-obscuration by the iconic projection of your own fame?

Abanindranath's prescriptive credo of meditation with eyes open (*sajag sadhana*) (Tagore 1941: 252) and his distaste for the ardours of exclusivist world-negating spirituality find expression in a number of his writings (and paintings—e.g., *Naamaiva Kevalam*). Rabindranath too had made explicit his allegiance to a freedom which found itself in the thousand bonds of life (Tagore 1962: 30). The ambiguous questions posed by Abanindranath through these "masks" then demand an answer from Rabindranath, an intimate reciprocity which accepts, rejects, modifies, specifies, or transforms this nomenclature (Banerji 2010: 113–14).

17.7 Pluripotence

It is not known if Rabindranath had an answer to this ambiguous and complex problematic. From 1932, the poet became interested in doing self-portraits and around this time, produced a set of twelve doodled variations on a black-and-white

Fig. 17.19 Robika, Katum-Kutum of Rabindranath by Abanindranath Tagore, c. 1947



photograph of himself (Fig. 17.15). Perhaps this was his response to the question of "public" iconicity and "private" individuality—a return to the shamanic unpredictability of the pluripotent person. Abanindranath's last painting of his uncle features his subjective portrait capturing the latter's passing in 1941—a rishi-like supine figure floats on the waves of the ocean of humanity, an anonymous pattern of rounded heads not dissimilar from the *janasamudra* which Gaganendranath had depicted in 1917 (Figs. 17.16, 17.17). Shortly following this, both the houses at the Tagore residence at Jorasanko were sold off and Abanindranath moved to a rented house in Baranagar.

He stopped painting but lived the last 10 years of his life making found-wood toys (relatives-in-wood or *katum-kutum*) with which he continued his intersubjective worlding (Banerji 2010: 117–23).

Rabindranath (or *Robika* as Abanindranath referred to him) continued to engage him in this world of play, along with his problematic of iconicity and unpredictability. Is it the image we leave behind in the symbolic politics of the public imaginary that remains to define us after our deaths or even during our lifetime, a virtuality which refuses reinvention, or is there an immanence

from which even the iconicity of the symbolic image emerges in a continuous and unpredictable unfolding? Does the wizard *baul* live on whirling like a dervish in the wind, an integral part of nature who visits us in unexpected hours? Abanindranath made a variety of *Robikas*, not unlike the poet's own multiple self-portraits, each one a different answer to the problematic. We close with two of these—one in which the icon arises organically and miraculously from the animistic essence of nature (Fig. 17.18) and the other in which the icon is abstracted down diagrammatically to its irreducible elements, two pieces of flat wood obliquely attached, and a pair of round eyes painted on one of these (Fig. 17.19). These provide us with the double valency of Rabindranath's post-colonial legacy—tamed, simplified, and explained as a fossilized patriarch for the national gallery, or the mystery that generated itself out of immanence and remains to reveal itself repeatedly, beyond all attempts at definition.

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Chapter 18
The Unanswered Question: Some Remarks on Tagore's Late Style

Saranindranath Tagore

Abstract This essay postulates a "late style" to Tagore's works, representing a shift from his earlier stance to a radically new ontology. "The Unanswered Question" referring to Tagore's poem 13 from his Last Poems, where the last sun asks the last question of reality and receives no answer, becomes the entry point of this hermeneutic exploration of Tagore's paintings and final poems. Relating his late poems to his paintings, the essay argues for the recognition of a late style in Tagore that moved away from a poetics of disclosure to a poetics of uncertainty.

Keywords Late style · Ontology · Poetics

18.1 I

Many great artists developed a late phase in their creative life. Such a period is typically marked by a break from the earlier works and is also shaped by vigorous attempts to push the boundaries of art. Perhaps the finest and the clearest example of a late period can be found in the musical writings of Beethoven. It is standard fare in Beethoven scholarship to include in the late period, upon flagging its

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Different and earlier versions of this paper were read at two conferences, one in Beijing (University of Beijing) and one in Kolkata (Netaji Research Bureau), both marking the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore. The title of the paper—"The Unanswered Question"— is the name of a remarkable musical composition by Charles Ives, which in my view broaches some of the same issues of ineffability and uncertainty raised in this paper. Throughout the paper I will refer to the subject of the essay Rabindranath instead of Tagore, following the customary Bengali habit of calling our poets and artists by their first names.

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stylistic origin in the great Hammerklavier sonata, op. 106 of 1818, such masterpieces as the Choral symphony, op. 125, the C Minor piano sonata, op. 111, and the final compositions of the late string quartets.[1] From the world of Indian classical music, if we consider carefully Nikhil Banerjee's performances from the last five or so years of his life, we can detect the emergence of a late style.[2] Similarly, from the world of painting, one thinks of the late works of Monet that would call up the penetrating presentations of his garden at Giverny or the folk-inspired works of the late Abanindranath built through an exquisite economy of expression.[3] Each late style is unique and individually nuanced and dependent on the artistic medium, and accordingly, any general commentary on the idea of a late style must take into account difference and multiplicity of expressions. My concern is this paper is much more specific.

Without multiplying examples, I move to the subject of this essay: the multiform creative figure of Rabindranath Tagore. More specifically, I wish to describe in this paper a late phase in his creative career. First, I will comment on why such a description is important for a proper evaluation of the sheer vastness and richness of Rabindranath's entire career astonishingly extended over almost all genres of artistic and literary production. Secondly, I will take some preliminary steps in the direction of a descriptive exploration of the late Rabindranath with special reference to the poems and the paintings. Overall, in this paper, I will be building on some ideas that I hinted at in my introduction to *Rabindranath Tagore: Final Poems* (2001).

18.2 II

William Radice in a pointed observation made a connection between the worlds of Rabindranath's paintings and the final poetry. Here are Radice's comments to *On My Birthday* (*Janmadine*), poem # 20, where Rabindranath imagines language freeing itself from the captivity of grammar and representational power:

> It is an exuberant poem, not I think one that sees no structure at all in the stuff of reality but one which strives, like many works of modern art, to pierce through to a deeper

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[1] For a collection of brilliant interpretive essays attempting to coherently profile a late Beethoven see Solomon (2004). Also, for a remarkable appraisal of Beethoven's late style, which is nearer to the concerns of this paper, see Sullivan (1960), especially the chapter on the Last Quartets.

[2] This becomes evident when one hears the monumental *alap/vilambit jods* of his later performances where melodic progression, much like Beethoven's late quartets composed in an altogether different language of contrapuntal sensibility, attempts to summon the *sublime* moment of musical stillness. A comparative discussion of the nature of 'lateness' across musical cultures can be the topic of an altogether different, yet-unwritten essay.

[3] These works are seldom seen but some marvelous examples can be found reproduced in Siva Kumar (2009). In the context of 'lateness', his miniature sculptural constructions are also relevant.

> structure that the ordering of our rational mind obscures. But in its vision of language abandoning itself, it comes perilously and awesomely close to acceptance of a complete lack of meaning or purpose in the universe: to a suspicion that, though there may be laws or rules or governing nature or the mind of man, their status maybe frivolous and arbitrary as the rules of a game; that the whole stupendous structure may rest on a bleak whimsicality. It comes close…but I think it stops short. We are brought, as it were, to the edge of a gulf that Tagore could never quite open. He went furthest in his paintings; but in his writings his courage to be what I truly am generally failed him (2005: 38–39).

I share Radice's intuition that there is a philosophical link between the paintings and the poems. I do not, however, agree with his gloss on the nature of this link. I wish to rethink this link in light of a philosophical break in Rabindranath's metaphysical thinking. In so far as this rupture, which I will soon describe, marks the poems Rabindranath composed in the last year of his life, it will be safe to suppose that it is meaningful to talk of a late Rabindranath where he is moving away from a metaphysics that shaped earlier periods of his work. I wish to bring the paintings within the orbit of this late phase, at least conceptually if not historically, because I will argue that the main thrust of the late metaphysics shapes the stark originality of Rabindranath's visual art. There is of course a temporal asymmetry between the last four collections of poems and the paintings because the former covers 1940–1941, whereas the latter were made from the 1920s to the last year of his life. Thus, I am thinking of the later Rabindranath more conceptually than historically, though I leave open the question of incorporating other material into the later phase that I will be describing.

Let us begin by considering *Janmadine* 20 (September 1940), quoting Radice's translation. Rabindranath begins the poem by unleashing a searing image of language loosing its ordering function consolidated through its syntactic and semantic gestures:

> Today I imagine the words of countless
> Languages to be suddenly fetterless–
> After long incarceration
> In the fortress of grammar, suddenly up in rebellion,
> Maddened by the stamp-stamping
> Of unmitigated regimented drilling,
> They have jumped the constraints of sentence
> To seek free expression in a world rid of intelligence,
> Snapping the chains of sense in sarcasm
> And ridicule of literary decorum.

These lines should give us a weighty pause and should make us ask why a poet whose peerless command of a language gave birth to its modern form question so deeply the revelatory capacity of language, namely, the idea that the representational power of language cannot capture and limn ontological truths, namely, the structure of Being. In this very late poem, the metaphysical despair concerning "words" enfolds artistic creativity:

> From them, the free-roving mind fashions
> Artistic creations
> Of a kind that do not conform to an orderly

Universe—whose threads are tenuous, loose, arbitrary,
Like a dozen puppies brawling,
Scrambling at each other's necks to no purpose or meaning:
Each bites another—
They squeal and yelp blue murder,
But their bites and yelps carry no true import of enmity,
Their violence is bombast, empty fury.
In my mind I imagine words thus shot of their meaning,
Hordes of them running amuck all day,
As if in the sky there were nonsense nursery syllables booming—
Horselum, bridelum, ridelum, into the fray.[4]

Indeed, the poems that chronologically follow *Janmadine* 20, collected in *Rogsojāy,* Ā*rogya*, and *Shesh Lekhā,* mostly written in the last year of his life, are filled with the image of silence further extending the metalinguistic conviction that language has no final vocabulary with which to answer the question of Being. On this count, the justly famous *Shesh Lekha* 13, where there is a riveting echo of the ultimate epistemological humility of the *Rig Vedic Nāsadīya Hymn*, is worthy of our attention:

The first day's sun
questioned
the new appearance of being—
Who are you?
There was no answer. Years went by.

Day's last sun
Asked the last question from the shores of the west
in the soundless evening—
Who are you?
There was no answer. (27 July 1941) (Barker and Tagore 2001: 58)

From poetic thinking, in this instance, emerges the question of ontology, rendered in a language supremely economical, the sun doubling up as the poet's name (*Rabi*), where language as poetry in its most refined incarnation is rebuffed by the sheer wall of bafflement. In so far as the answer is to be conveyed in poetic terms, the question posed by the poem limns its own non-answerability. The maddened vision of language breaking up from within in *Janmadine* 20 is transfigured here into an hymnal invocation of silence. A few days earlier, the "end"—perhaps doubly signifying an individual death and the *telos* of existence—is thought to be wordless. Here are the luminous lines, naked and vulnerable:

Today my sack is empty.
I have given completely
whatever I had to give.
In return if I receive anything—

[4] Both the excerpts are from Radice's remarkable translation (2004: 124–125). Perhaps Radice is thinking about this poem alone in his comments on the later poems quoted earlier.

> some love, some forgiveness—
> then I will take it with me
> when I step on the boat that crosses
> to the festival of the wordless end. (May 6, 1941) (Barker and Tagore: 57)

These final poems—more examples can be given—seems to be of a piece with a view that the early Wittgenstein espoused at the end of the *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*: What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence (1981: 74). However, upon the admission of what I have called epistemological humility, the philosopher literally becomes silent, whereas the poet makes silence itself the stuff of poetry. Such poetry, built on humility and uncertainty and riding on a reconfigured vision of language, inaugurates a departure for Rabindranath's poetic metaphysics. These final poems indelibly illustrate the later Heidegger's insistence that saying (*sagen*) is not primarily a matter of linguistic reference (the house of being of an earlier Heidegger) but evokes a form of thinking that is poetic, whose philosophical profile, in the words of the American philosopher and Heidegger commentator Calvin Schrag: "commemorates but does not represent; it is matter of showing rather than referring; it is a setting forth instead of an explaining; it is evocative rather the demonstrative" (Schrag 1994: 172).

Why do I summon the language of departure signaling the possibility of a rupture in Rabindranath's creative development? Rabindranath's poetic metaphysics was substantiated by his concept of *jīban-debatā*. He connected his poetry—indeed his larger creative life—to this concept of a guiding principle, which he understood in theistic terms. I understand the term "theism" in reference to contemporary Anglophonic philosophy of religion where it is used to signify belief in a deity who is a personal being capable of relating person to person with phenomenal beings such as us. Monotheists typically hold that such a being is singular and perfect, endowed with omniproperties, such as omniscience, omnipotence, and so on. Polytheists, on the other hand, such as Puranic Hindus or Classical Greeks, hold that such beings are multiple and, though not perfect morally or otherwise, far outstrip phenomenal beings in power. The concept of *jīban-debatā* is theistic in resonance because, apart from the semantic thrust of the word *debatā*, Rabindranath conceived of the notion in personal terms:

> To this poet, who fashions my life out of all my good and bad, strong and weak points, I have given the name of *Jīban-debatā* in my poetry. I do not just think that he forms all the separate fragments of my being into a unity, so as to bring it into consonance with the universe; I also believe he has brought me to this present life from some previous existence, via a strange stage of forgetfulness; and that a strong memory (derived from his power) of my flowing journey through the universe continues to remain subtly within me. That is why I feel so ancient a harmony with the trees and animals and birds of this world; that is why I do not find the vastness and mystery of the world either alien or terrifying (Tagore 1969: 7–8).[5]

Rabindranath's account of transcendence in terms of *jīban-debatā* is intensely theistic because as is evident from this passage, his entire poetic imagination is

[5] The English translation is taken from Radice (1991: 17).

tethered to this notion as the giver of unity whereby the self becomes consonant with the endless diversity of the universe. This consonance, the result of the poet's umbilical connection to the fashioner of his life, lends the metaphysical structure to Rabindranath's poetics, and this is a poetics of disclosure. Rabindranath speaks directly to this idea when he described his 1879 Sudder Street religious experience—the moment of origin of the *Jīban-debatā* idea—in his 1930 Hibbert Lectures at Oxford:

> I had my sorrows that left their memory in a long burning track across my days, but I felt at that moment that in them I lent myself to a travail of creation that ever exceeded my own personal bounds like stars which in their individual fire-bursts are lighting the history of the universe (Tagore 1975: 60).[6]

The "lighting" of reality through the creative process, the disclosure of being beyond "personal bounds," is the result of the poet's relationship with the transcendent—the infinite defined in humanity as he would call it in the Hibbert Lectures. The poetics of disclosure that is so central to the *jīban-debatā* concept cannot be used as a metaphysical fulcrum for the final poems, precisely because poetic language is no more seen as a possible vehicle for ontological disclosure. Poetry, in the later Rabindranath, keeps alive this conviction. The poetics of disclosure gives way to a painfully nurtured poetics of uncertainty. How are we to philosophically understand this rupture? Does the emergence of silence occasion a metaphysical nihilism or can silence evoke being in a different way within the folds of poetic thinking?

18.3 III

The *Vedānta* school of classical Indian Philosophy was in part constructed to provide theoretical interpretations of various Upanishadic claims concerning transcendence, captured in *māhāvākyās* such as "*tat tvam asi.*" The main concern of this school was to understand the nature and the relation between the central notions of the *Upanishads*: the transcendence of *Brahman and Atman.* As is well known, anchored to this task, three different subschools of *Vedantā* developed in the classical tradition: the non-qualified non-dualist *Advaita*, the qualified non-dualist *Visistādvaita*, and the qualified dualist *Dvaita.* Though marked by many distinctions, for our purpose that focuses on the problem of representation, the relevant difference between the subschools concerns the concept of qualification. In the philosophical literature of classical *Vedānta,* the debate concerning qualities (*guna*) pivots on the question of whether or not *Brahman* can be a field in which properties can inhere. Sankara, the greatest of the *Advaitins*, though admitting a sublatable manifestation of qualified Brahman (*saguna*), is unequivocal in

[6] He proceeds to write "this idea of mine found at a later date its expression in some of my poems addressed to what I called *jīban-debatā*."

his conviction that Brahman as being has no qualities (*nirguna*). Ramanuja the chief actor in the *Visistādvaitan* tradition and Madhva the most powerful *Dvaita* voice, on the other hand, though divergent on the question of the metaphysical relationship between *Brahman* and *Atman*, concur on the point that Brahman is qualified. This distinction between the *nirguna* and the *saguna* conceptions of ultimate transcendence has powerful repercussions for views concerning the representational limits of language. For Sankara, the *nirguna* theorist, in contradistinction to the *saguna Vedantists*, language cannot disclose the structures of being, precisely because linguistic structures have a referential domain and Brahman by its very *nirguna* nature cannot provide it. Meaning via reference requires *guna* of objects that are to be disclosed. In its absence, any language-dependent description of being can proceed via *negativa* as suggested in the *Upanishadic* phrase *neti neti* but cannot affect ontological disclosure. Sankara's conception of ultimate transcendence moves away from a conversational model of religion termed *Bhakti* in Sanskritic religious discourse and summons a supremely experiential religious horizon where ontological disclosure is no more a linguistic event, written or spoken, but turns on the crucible of a transfiguring yogic experience.

Rabindranath's conception of *jīban-debatā*, a fundamentally *Bhakti*-driven and *Vaishnav*-inspired concept, is built on a rejection of this *Advaitic* approach:

> In India, there are those whose endeavor is to merge completely their personal self in an impersonal entity which is without any quality and definition; to reach a condition wherein mind becomes perfectly blank…this is considered to be the ultimate end of Yoga…without disputing its truth I maintain that it may be valuable as a great psychological experience but all the same it is not religion, even as the knowledge of the ultimate state of the atom is of no use to an artist who deals in images in which atoms have taken form (Tagore 1975: 74).

The central philosophical distinction in the passage is this: The *nirguna* approach to matters religious is like the subatomic physicist's search for the ultimate structure of the atom, whereas the poet's religion celebrative of the phenomenal horizon deals with worlds that are constituted by the atoms but are not reducible to them. It is this poetics of confidence I am suggesting that gives way to a poetics of uncertainty and humility, signing a moment of departure, in the poet's vision of language breaking up from within. Representing worlds perhaps is not tantamount to representing Being, and this claim is shot through with *Advaita* sensibility. The shape of such a poetics gathers force in the poetry of the final year where "wordlessness" becomes the stuff of poetry, in the sublime intermingling of silence and the anticipation of death. I say sublime in the sense of Kant where a presentation to consciousness fails to be processed by a determinate concept of the understanding. Accordingly, Kant provides this famous example in a footnote in the *Critique of Judgement*:

> Perhaps nothing more sublime has been said, or a thought ever been expressed more sublimely, than in that inscription above the temple of *Isis* (Mother Nature): "I am all that is, that was, and that will be, and no mortal has lifted my veil" (Kant 1987: 185).

The silence of the final poems is sublime in this decidedly Kantian sense: the inadequacy of language even in its most refined poetic expression is not sufficient

for ontological disclosure because the idea of being is not manifested in any presentation of worlds. This I take it is also the Advaitic point: Brahman as *Nirguna* already and always escapes the movement of conceptual understanding and thus enters, by virtue of formlessness, the field of the sublime. Allow Kant to make the point in the superb telling of *his* distinction between the beautiful and the sublime:

> The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in the object's being bounded. But the sublime can also be found in a formless object, in so far as we present *unboundedness* either in the object or because the object prompts us to present it, while yet we add this unboundedness the thought of its totality (Kant 1987: 98).

For Kant, the presentation of the sublime (consistent with his earlier critique of pure reason that circumscribes knowledge within the domain of *experience that are commensurable to the concepts of the understanding*) invokes an esthetics of feeling and can never be inscribed as claims of cognition/knowledge. For Advaita, the formless (*nirguna*) Brahman too as a figure of the sublime registers beyond the conceptual and thus is outside the reach of the representational power of language; however, the formless is *knowable* in a different sense, in a crucible of yogic experience toward which poetry can be a gesture but not an articulator. Thus, within the schematics of the sublime, the poetic representation of Brahman is impossible. Unlike Ramanuja, in Advaita, reading the world is not the same as reading Brahman. The paintings of Rabindranath inhabit this notional trajectory of representational uncertainty that cuts across language and being.

18.4 IV

In a lecture on his paintings delivered in London on the July 2, 1930, Rabindranath made a piercing observation that independence from language brings the worlds of painting and music close together. Here is what he said:

> There can be no question that originally melody accompanied words, giving interpretation to the sentiments contained in them. But music threw off this bond of subservience and represented moods abstracted from words, and characters that were indefinite. In fact, this liberated music does not acknowledge that feelings which can be expressed in words are essential for its purpose, though they may have their secondary place in musical structure. This right of independence has given music its greatness, and I suspect that evolution of pictorial and plastic art develops on this line, aiming to be freed from an absolute alliance with natural facts and incidents (Tagore 1999: 637).

There are two suppositions buried in this formulation of the relation between music and painting. First, there is the growing conviction, absent in the construal of *Jīban-debatā,* that the representational power of words though allied with nature and history ("facts" and "incidents") may not have any final response to the question of being, which as the poems of *Sesh Lekha* illustrate haunted the poet till the very end. In this respect, we just need to recall the opening lines of his last poem written hours before the final surgery from which he would not recover: "*Tomār srishtir path rekhecho ākīrna kari bichitra chalanājāle he*

chalanāmoyī[7]" Secondly, absolute music (viz., music that is liberated from words) and painting are invoked by Rabindranath as allied modes of expression that can interrogate Being beyond the phenomenal exhibition of nature and history.

The paintings display the extension of the thesis concerning the representational limits of language to a more radical statement concerning the limits of representation itself. As the style of painting invented by Rabindranath forcefully argues, conventional representation is inadequate if art is to be a response to the mystery of being. Indeed, the problem of presentation and in turn representation, with its inscriptions in the Kantian sublime, lies behind much of modern art taking up various shapes in such diverse paintings as the *Bathers* (1906) of the late Cezanne, *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) of the early Picasso, or *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* (1912) of Marcel Duchamp, not to mention the discarding of representation altogether in the canvasses of Rothko or Kandinsky. Examples need not be multiplied. The great movements of modern art—Impressionism, Dadaism, Cubism, Futurism, Primitivism, and Surrealism—grappled in different ways with this problem of presentation/representation, and each challenged the received grammar of pictorial formation. Indeed, J-F Lyotard extends the Kantian analytic of the sublime to make this very point: "to make visible that there is something which can be conceived and which can neither be seen nor made visible: this is what is at stake in modern painting" (Lyotard 1993: 43). He continues: "But how to make visible that there is something which cannot be seen? Kant himself shows the way when he names "formlessness, the absence of form," as a possible index to the unpresentable" (Lyotard 1993: 43).

There is nothing in the history of Indian art that prepares us for the image forms and the manner of their presentation found in Rabindranath's painting. I quote from Prithwish Neogy a list of such images:

> Unfurling, animated ribbons…composite flower birds…ambiguous imps; oddly sensuous nudes on extravagant furniture…romantic dream houses… masks of terror; incandescent evening landscapes (Neogy 1992: 201).

There are interesting visual relationships between some of Rabindranath's images and the woodcuts of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, which have made some scholars point to the primitivist and expressivist dimensions of the poet's paintings.[8] However, Rabindranath himself distanced himself from this interpretation of his visual work—a move that is perhaps symptomatic of a larger resistance on his part to be defined in terms of the contemporary early twentieth-century art movements sweeping across Europe. The main reason he gives for the rejection of the view that his paintings can be brought under the umbrella of primitivism is based on the observation that the art of the primitivist is too studied and non-natural. Rabindranath voiced this opinion in

[7] In this line, the poet names the Real the goddess of deception and says that she has scattered deception-nets throughout the paths of creation.

[8] See, for instance, Dyson (2013).

a letter to Hertha Mendel, the wife of the scientist–friend Bruno Mendel, acknowledging her gift of books on modern art:

> The books on modern art which you so kindly sent me have reached me at last. I feel deeply interested in studying them though a considerable number of them puzzle me sorely. Some of these artists seem to be obsessed with a doctrine and a primitive quality which they try to impart to their work is not naturally their own. Evidently it is a reaction against a certain formal conventionalism, a sort of *cul-de-sac* of artistic respectability that had no spirit of growth in it, but the reaction itself may turn into a convention because of its lack of sincerity (Dutta and Robinson 1997: 399).

In this statement, I read a plea on the part of Rabindranath to judge his paintings in his own terms and not in the forced terms of academic conventions of European art to which he did not belong. I do not mean to suggest that it is fruitless to develop comparative analyses of the style of Rabindranath's paintings. However, I do wish to claim that hermeneutic honesty dictates that the poet's own contentions concerning his paintings, hitherto seldom discussed, be invoked in the critical appreciation of his visual work. Moreover, he was hesitant about exhibiting the paintings among his people and this hesitation suggests in my reckoning that if the songs were the most public of his creation—("everything else will be forgotten but not my songs")—the paintings were the most personal. As late as 1929, he is writing to Suniti Kumar Chattapadhyay:

> Some time ago I drew a picture in your notebook. I am not sure it was a good idea. I did not sign the picture, and I will not. I do not wish to acquaint the people of my province with my work as an artist… Alive or dead I have no desire to make this creation of mine public here. My pictures will not be allowed to commit the same offence as my other creations (Dutta and Robinson 1997: 367).

Thus, I am suggesting that a deep hermeneutic of the paintings should look beyond the straitjacketing implications of art movements and art theories alone and bring into play a fundamental philosophical re-orientation concerning the poet's approach to the question of being. The paintings posit the representational limits of image, whereas the final poems pose the representational limits of words. In thinking the limits of representation, the late Rabindranath is not alone in the history of the expressive arts: We only need to recall the late string quartets of Beethoven or the very last paintings of Titian to realize this truth.

If the ultimate Upanishadic context of the whole range of Rabindranath's creative life is given its due, it is hermeneutically urgent to return to this *ur-text*, at least in its *Advaitic* formulation, in framing the philosophical preoccupation of the late Rabindranath. In framing his own work as a painter, he says that the evolution of the plastic and pictorial arts aims to be free of any alliance with representation. Of course, this point should be taken in the context of Rabindranath's own art because as a generalized art historical view, it would be false. Setting aside the great sweep of representational thought in European painting, even in modern art, we have examples of hyper-representation in the paintings of such figures, Americans in this instance, as Chuck Close and the photo-realist Ralph Goings. I am suggesting that Rabindranath's growing sense concerning the limits of thought, whether expressed in word or image, is woven from a single fabric and

when this conviction is read in light of an opposition to a metaphysics of disclosure as inscribed in the *jīban-debatā* concept, a distinctively *Advaitic* sensibility emerges. The limit is an ontological limit: The question of the sun (*Rabi*) remains unanswered. Silence in the late Rabindranath does not lead to the impossibility of transcendence because the Upanishadic silence, unlike the silence of Wittgenstein, does not rule out experience, transfigured and transfiguring (*paramārthikā*), of the fullness of being. Only the poet *qua* poet and the painter *qua* painter have no access to such worlds.

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Visva Sahitya

Rabindranath Tagore

Speech delivered at the Jatiya Sikhsa Parishad (*the National Council for Education*) *and first published in 1907.*[1]

All the talents that we possess within ourselves are only for reaching out to everyone else. Through such relationships we realize ourselves, we attain truth. Otherwise, it does not matter whether I am or anything else is.

Our link to the reality of the world is of three kinds: the connection made by the intellect, the connection arising out of need, and the connection found in joy.

Among these, the connection of the intellect can be thought of as a kind of contest. It is as the tie between the hunter and his quarry. The intellect places truth in a witness box of its own making and interrogates it to extract its secrets, bit by bit. This is why the intellect grows proud of its truths. The more of truth it knows, the more power it arrogates to itself.

[1] *Rabindra Racahanabali X* "Prabandha,": 324–33. Kolkata: Shiksha Sachib Government of West Bengal, 1989. For years, the essay was only available in English in summaries or sections, such as the translation of the last few paragraphs by Buddhadev Bose. Comparatists like Bose and Sisir Kumar Das quoted from it as the first call for an Indian Comparative Literature. Bose quoted his translation of a few paragraphs in the mission statement of the first Department of Comparative Literature that he founded in Jadavpur University. His remarks and translation were available on the website of the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University (http://www.complitju.org/World%20Literature/WorldLiterature.html) accessed 12 July 2011; the site is translation of this essay, see "World Literature" in Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, eds Sisir Kumar Das and Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001; 2nd ed., 2010).

Given its importance, we have tried to offer a new translation of the essay. In our translation, we have, for most part, retained the more accurate rendering of Tagore's words, which Swapan Chakravorty (Das and Chaudhuri 2001: 138–150) has often rendered into more idiomatic English paraphrase. While the Chakravorty translation makes Tagore seem more direct and modern, even contemporary, our attempt has been to retain the aesthetic flavour of the original, instead of rendering it merely as a text of ideas. Chakravorty 's translation simplifies sentences, rephrasing some considerably, aiming not only at lucidity and simplicity, but also offers, at times, a gist or even interpretation of Tagore's meaning, without being true to his original style of expression. We, on the other hand, have consciously tried to maintain Tagore's somewhat complicated syntax, rather than simplifying his sentences into "plain" English, sticking to his sentence and paragraph breaks, rather than combining and rewriting them to clarify and simply his meaning. We have also avoided gender neutral alterations, translating *manush* as "man" rather than "human" mostly because such usage was characteristic of Tagore's times. Tagore almost certainly included the woman in his notion of man, though in specifically speaking of woman in one section of his

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Next is the connection of need. In this connection, truth joins forces with our own strengths. In this relationship of self-interest, truth further reveals itself to us. But still our separation from truth does not disappear. Just as the English trader bowed before the Nawab, offered him gifts, and having secured his own interests, ascended the throne himself, we too use truth to achieve our ends and think we have the ownership of the world. Then we declare that nature is our slave, water, air and fire—our unpaid servants.

Finally, the connection of joy: this is a connection of beauty or bliss in which all differences dissolve; there remains no pride; we do not hesitate to give ourselves to the very small, to the weak. There the king of Mathura [Krishna] is at his wits' end trying to find a way to hide his royal dignity from the lowly milkmaid of Vrindavan. Where the connection is that of joy, we are not limited by the power of the intellect or the power of work; we only experience ourselves. There remains no cover or calculation in between.

To put it in one sentence, the connection of the intellect is our school, the connection of need our office, and the connection of joy our home. We do not live completely in the school, nor do we fully manifest ourselves in the office; it is only in our homes that we spread our whole selves out and live. The school is devoid of ornamentation, the office remains undecorated, but we do beautify our homes.

What is this connection of joy? It is to know another as our very own, and to know ourselves as if we were another's. When we know in this manner, no questions remain. We do not ask, Why do I love myself? The joy in our experience of ourselves is self-evident. Similarly, when we experience ourselves in another, we do not need to ask, why have we liked them.

Yajnavalkya tells Gargi:

> Naba are putrasya kamay putrah priyo bhabati
> Atmanastu kamay putrah priya bhabati.
> Naba are bittasya kamay bittam priyam bhabati. Atmanastu kamay bittyam priyam bhabati.[2]

Footnote 1 (continued)

essay, he acknowledges that much of the other references referred to masculine roles and occupations; at the level of abstraction, then, "man" may be understood as human, but in its practical application, Tagore was quite aware of its gendered implications.

Another feature of this translation is that several important or technical words from the original have been included in parenthesis so that the reader who knows Bangla or any other modern Indian language may have some notion of the original word used by the author. Conversely, when we retain the original word in the sentence, we provide the translation in parenthesis. Extraneous items, often connectives or explanatory phrases, have been placed in square brackets to indicate that they were not in the original. Moreover, because it is being published in India, we have avoided glossing references to deities such as Krishna, Siva, Parvati, or Kubera.

[2] Tagore quotes the same lines in his book *Sadhana* too*: The Realisation of Life* (1913; London: Macmillan, 1915):

> It is said in one of the Upanishads: It is not that thou lovest thy son because thou desirest him, but thou lovest thy son because thou desirest thine own soul. (Footnote: *Na va are putrasya kamaya putrah priyo bhavati, atmanastu kamaya putrah priyo bhavati*.) The meaning of this is, that whomsoever we love, in him we find our own soul in the highest sense. The final truth of our existence lies in this. *Paramatma,* the supreme soul, is in me, as well as in my son, and my joy in my son is the realisation of this truth. It has become quite a commonplace fact, yet it is wonderful to think upon, that the joys and sorrows of

The son is dear not because we long for the son, but because we long for the *atma*, our true self. Property is dear not because we desire the property but because we desire the *atma*, or the self. This means that in whatever we experience ourselves more fully, we desire that. The son eliminates my shortcomings; I find myself all the more in my son. In him, I become more of myself. This is why he is my dearest kin; he is a manifestation of my self outside of me. It is the truth I experience so certainly within myself that makes me experience love; that very same truth I know in my son and therefore my love for him expands. That is why to be close to someone is to know what they love. It is thus that we understand where, in this wide world, they have located themselves and how far they have spread their souls. Where my affection does not lie, my soul only skirts the rim of its own boundary.

A child laughs at the sight of light or movement. The child finds in that light, that movement, a magnification of its own consciousness; that is why it experiences joy.

But beyond the senses, when the child's consciousness starts to manifest itself in the various levels of its heart and mind, then a little movement does not give him joy. It is not as if he experiences no joy, but only a bit of it. In this way, the more a soul blossoms, the more it wants to experience its own truth in a greater way.

Man can experience his innermost soul outside himself most easily and completely in another. In sight, in sound, in the mind's emotions, in the play of imagination, in the many tugs of the heart, it exerts itself among other people. This is why in knowing others, coming close to others, and in doing others' work does

Footnote 2 (continued)

> our loved ones are joys and sorrows to us–nay they are more. Why so? Because in them we have grown larger, in them we have touched that great truth which comprehends the whole universe. (29)

The dialogue in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (II.iv) is actually between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi and not between him and Gargi as Tagore attributes it. Yagnavalkya says:

> It is not for the sake of the husband, my dear, that he is loved, but for one's own sake that he is loved. It is not for the sake of the wife, my dear, that she is loved, but for one's own sake that she is loved. It is not for the sake of the sons, my dear, that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved. It is not for the sake of wealth, my dear, that it is loved, but for one's own sake that it is loved. It is not for the sake of the Brahmana, my dear, that he is loved, but for one's own sake that he is loved. It is not for the sake of the Kshatriya, my dear, that he is loved, but for one's own sake that he is loved. It is not for the sake of worlds, my dear, that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved. It is not for the sake of the gods, my dear, that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved. It is not for the sake of beings, my dear, that they are loved, but for one's own sake that they are loved. It is not for the sake of all, my dear, that all is loved, but for one's own sake that it is loved. The Self, my dear Maitreyi, should be realised – should be heard of, reflected on and meditated upon. By the realisation of the Self, my dear, through hearing, reflection and meditation, all this is known (http://www.messagefrommasters.com/upanishads/brihadaranyaka5.htm).

Tagore quotes selectively from the Upanishad. The standard interpretation of these verses is that all love springs from the atma or the self and it is because the same self resides in others that we love them; they are, in other words, loved not for their own sakes, but for the sake of the self. The simpler explanation is that we love others for our own selfish reasons, not for themselves but for ourselves.

it fill to the brim. Consequently, in every nation and in every period, whoever has been able to disseminate his soul mostly widely among the people, thus realizing and expressing it most fully, has become a great man. He is the real *mahatma*. The success of my soul lies in the whole of humanity—whosoever has not understood even a little of this at some point of time, has received a little less of humanity. In knowing the *atma* merely within himself, he knows it in a diminished form.

To know oneself among others—such is the natural disposition of the human soul—to which selfishness is one impediment, pride another. Before these impediments of *samsara* the natural flow of our soul breaks into pieces; we do not see the beauty of humanity in its undivided glory.

But I know that some people will argue, if this be the natural dharma (inclination) of the human soul, then why does the world disrespect it so? The things you dismiss as impediments, the self-interest, the pride, why will you not call these our natural dharma as well?

In fact many people say such things. That is because we are more likely to see the impediments to our nature than our nature itself. When a man first starts riding a two wheeler, he is greeted more with falling than riding. At that time if someone says, this man is practicing falling down, not riding, it is profitless to argue with him. In every step I take in this world I can see the impediments of self-interest and pride, but in spite of that if I cannot see man's deep effort to safeguard *svadharma* (one's true nature), which is to come together with others, if I decree merely the fall as natural, then that would be pointless nitpicking.

Indeed, to recognize the dharma that is natural to us, to know it as such, to realize its full powers, we need to encounter impediments in its way. It is only thus that it realizes itself consciously, and the more its consciousness deepens, the more profound its joy is. Everything follows a similar pattern.

Consider the intellect. The dharma of the intellect is to ascertain the causes of things. When it is able to do so obviously, it does not quite see itself clearly. But the causal relations of this universe are so deeply and secretly rooted that to excavate them the intellect must labour night and day. In this effort to eliminate impediments, the intellect experiences itself deeply in the discovery of scientific knowledge–in doing so its grandeur increases. Indeed if one thinks deeply, science is nothing but the realization of the intellect in material reality. Where it discovers its own rules, it perceives itself and matter in conjunction. This is called understanding. In this seeing is the joy of the intellect. Otherwise to find that the reason apples fall to the ground is the same as why the sun attracts the earth would not have made men so happy. So what if the sun attracts the earth, what is it to me? It matters to me because my intellect has been able to capture this immense phenomenon of the universe and I have exerted and established my own intellect over the whole universe in doing so. Everything from a particle of dust to the Sun, Moon, and stars thus encounters my intellect. In this way endless secrets of the universe are bringing out man's intellect and expressing it in a magnified way to him; after this meeting with the universe, man's intellect returns to him once again, augmented. This confluence of intellect with outer objects is intelligence. And in this confluence is the joy of our capacity to understand.

Similarly, to find completely one's own humanity among other people is the natural dharma of the human soul and in that is its joy. To achieve this dharma fully and consciously, it must go through impediments and obstructions within and without. This is why self-interest is so strong, pride in oneself so unshakable, and the path of samsara so difficult. In the face of so many difficulties, wherever the dharma of humanity expresses itself in brilliance, strength, and complete beauty, it is so joyful. There we find ourselves enhanced.

This is why we wish to read the biographies of great men. In their characters we see our flawed and cloaked selves freed and uncovered. We derive pleasure from history when we see our own character manifest in many people, many nations, many eras, many incidents, many varieties, and many shapes. Then whether I understand it clearly or not, in my heart I accept that I am one with all men—to whatever degree I experience that unity, to that degree is my well-being and joy.

But in biographies and histories we do not see the whole clearly nor in its full range from the top to the bottom. It appears before us covered with many problems, many obscurities. Even if the face of humanity that we see is itself immense, to dress up that face according to our tastes, to immortalize it in language, is the natural propensity of our hearts. As if in doing that, we make it more specially our own. In expressing my own affection for it in beautiful language and skilled craftsmanship, I transform it into an object of everyone's heart. It is no more afloat in this samsara's ebb and flow.

In this way, all that manifests itself so luminously on the outside, be that the Sun's bright rays or the brightness of a great character or the emotion of our own hearts–whatever kindles our emotions from one moment to another, that, the heart entwines in a creation of its own and clings to as its own. In such instances it is the heart that expresses itself more and more concretely.

[To recapitulate] man's self-expression in the world is of two kinds. One kind is his work, the other his literary creativity. These two modes have always proceeded by side. Man has poured himself forth both in the compositions of his work and in the creations of his imagination. These two have progressed completing each other. Through them we know man in history and literature.

In his work arena man has built home, state, and religion with all the might and knowledge of his body, mind, and heart. In its building is manifested all that man has learned, achieved, and desired. In this way man's nature entwines with the world and manifests itself in many images in the midst of everything else. This is how all that was vague in the realm of ideas manifests itself in material form in the world, what was weak in one, becomes many-limbed and definite in union with the many. That is why it has so happened that no individual is able to express himself clearly or completely without home, society, state, and religion, all of which have been built by the many over a long period of time. These things have become the means for the self-expression of man. Without them we cannot consider ourselves civilized or fully human. Whether as individuals or as societies, to the extent we remain without a link to the whole, to that extent are we barbaric. Therefore, in civilized societies, if the state is affected, broadly speaking, every individual is also

affected; if the society is constricted, every individual's self-blossoming is stunted. The more liberal man's composition of his larger world, the more is he at liberty to express his humanity. To the degree he is inhibited, to that same degree is man's self-expression impoverished; that is why samsara has devised the expedient of work so that man may in his self-expression find his only joy.

But the expression of himself in the work sphere is not man's primary objective—it is merely a by-product. The homemaker expresses herself in her house work but it is not the express intention of her mind to do so. Through house work she fulfils many of her desires; these desires are reflected by her work and illuminate her true nature.

There are, however, occasions on which we wish chiefly to celebrate our self-expression. Imagine a wedding day. On the one hand there are all the arrangement to be made, on the other, there is the need to express one's innermost emotions; on that day people of the house cannot but announce to the world their happiness and joy. What is the way to announce this? Flutes play, lamps are lit, and every room decorated with flowers. Through beautiful music, beautiful aromas, beautiful sights, and dazzling spectacle, the heart spills over like a multi-fauceted fountain. Through all these signs it attempts to spread its joy among others and thereby make it real.

[Similarly] the mother cannot but take care of her child. But it is not merely that; not only in her tending to her child, but of its own accord and without any other reason does a mothers' love wish to express itself in the world outside. Then it brims over in so many games, caresses, and words. Then she dresses her child in so many colours, so many ornaments, and simply, needlessly, wants to extend her own largesse in even more plenitude, her comeliness in even more beauty.

From this we understand that such is the dharma of our heart. It wants to disseminate its emotions into the world. It is not complete in its self. It always wants to make its own truths the truths of the world. The house it inhabits is not merely a structure of bricks and mortar—it attempts to make it a home and colours it in its own hues. The country in which the heart lives does not remain as earth, water and sky—instead, only when that country manifests itself as the mother-image of God's life giving force, then it finds joy. Otherwise the heart cannot see itself in the external world. If this self-expression does not happen, the heart becomes indifferent and indifference is the death of the heart.

In this manner does the heart develop its savoury relationships with truth. Where relationships are full of flavour, there is give and take. Our heart-goddess's (hriday-Lakshmi's) pride is hurt when she cannot send back an offering equal to what she receives from the world. To manifest the pride of her reciprocal hospitality she fashions her tray of offerings with many ingredients, many languages, sounds, brushes, and blocks of stone [for carving]. In so doing, if any of her needs be served, well and good, but often, even at their expense, she is eager to express herself. She wants to display her lavishness even if the price is bankruptcy. Self-expression is that department in man's nature which is the chief site of incautious spending—it is here that the accountant of the intellect laments over his losses, striking his forehead in frustration.

The heart says, how will I be as true as I am within in the without? Where is that material, that opportunity, in the outside world? It cries out, I cannot show myself, cannot establish myself in the outside. When the rich person becomes aware of his own wealth, he may blow up all of Kuber's gold to show that richness to the world. When the lover feels true love in his heart, then to express that love, that is, to make that love real in the world, he is ready to sacrifice in an instant his wealth, soul, and self-respect. In this way the heart's desire to make the external an object of the internal and vice versa continues persistently. Balaramdas' verse declares: *Tomay hiyar bhitor hoite ke koilo bahir*. [You being inside my heart, who has drawn you out?] Meaning, a dear object such as belongs to the interiors of the heart, somehow has been brought outside, hence the desire to return it back to the inside. There is also the reverse. When the heart does not perceive the correlate of its inner desires and emotions in the outer world, then it tries desperately to create those images with its own hands. In this way the heart works to make the world its own and to make itself over to the world. To express itself in the outside is a part of this work. That is why the heart can convince us to give up everything in its compulsion to express itself.

When a barbaric militia goes to war, it does not simply try to defeat the enemy. It dons war paint, it screams and struts its dance of destruction—this is a manifestation in the outer world of the violence within. As if the violence would be incomplete without this display. Violence fulfils its need in warfare, but offers a seemingly pointless performance of hostility for the sheer satisfaction of the pleasure [of self-expression].

Even in the contemporary wars in the West, it is not as if there is no opportunity for the expression of aggression. However, in these modern wars the play of intellect has become prominent, with the imperative of the human heart gradually fading away. When in Egypt the English army was attacked, they did not simply die to win a war. They died to express the ignited flame of their hearts. Those who merely want to win the war do not do such unnecessary things. Even in suicide the heart wants to express itself. Who else could think of such needless expenditure?

The puja (religious ritual) we perform is done by the thinking person in one way and by the devoted one in another. The intelligent person thinks that by praying I will receive good fortune for myself; and the man of faith thinks that without puja my devotion knows no completeness. Even if the offering has no other value than the outer expression of my heart's devotion, I shall have found solace for my devotion. In this way devotion expresses itself in a puja and fulfils itself. The mentality of the calculating person's puja is akin investing money for interest, while the devotee's puja is merely an expenditure. To express itself, the heart hardly notices the losses it incurs.

Wherever in the world we see the possibility of such a correlate of our heart, our heart unquestioningly gives itself there. Beauty in the world is a manifestation of such largesse. The flower, we see, is in no hurry to become the seed; it transcends its need and blooms beautifully; the clouds do not rush off after raining, they languorously and needlessly catch our eyes with their colours; the trees do not stick-like spread their arms outwards as beggars for light and shower, but

green thickets of leaves fill the horizon with their bounty; the sea, we notice, is not an immense office that transports water to the atmosphere in the form of clouds but awes us in its fathomlessness; and the mountain not only feeds water to the rivers of the earth but like *Rudra*, deep in yoga, stills the fears of those who cross the skies—thus we discover the *hriday-dharma* (the heart's-purpose) of the world. The over-wizened intellect might ask, why this careless expenditure in needless efforts? The ever-young heart answers, just because it pleases me; I see no other reason. The heart knows: there is one heart that expresses itself every moment in the universe. Why else would there be so much beauty, music, gestures, signs, and signals, so much decoration across creation? The heart is not taken in by the miserliness of business: that is why to entice it need has been so elaborately hidden from the earth, the water, and the skies, in so many needless arrangements. If the world was not flavourful (*rasamay*) we would have been small, insulted beings. Our hearts would say, "I am not invited to the world's sacrifice (yajna).[3]" But the whole world, surpassing its various duties, has brimmed over with joy and is telling the heart, in so many different ways, I want you: in laughter I want you, in tears I want you, in fear I want you, in assurance I want you, in anger I want you, in peace I want you.

Thus in the world, we witness two things—the expression of work and the expression of emotion. But that which is being expressed through work we cannot witness in its totality or understand fully. We cannot fathom with our own knowledge the eternal power of knowledge that lies therein.[4]

But the expression of being (*bhava*) is a palpable expression. What is beautiful, is beautiful. Whatever is immense, is immense. The *Rudra* (wrathful) is frightening. The *rasas* (emotional states) of the world enter our hearts and bring out the *rasa* of our own hearts. Whatever be the hide and seek of this confluence, whatever be the impediments on its way, there is nothing but this expression and this confluence to be found there.

Therefore we see the similarity between this world-samsara and the human-samsara (the macrocosm and the microcosm). God's truth and knowledge are manifest in the work of the world, and his joy is instantiated in the flavours of the world. It is difficult to grasp his wisdom through work, but there is no difficulty in experiencing his joy in the *rasas*. Because, in these pleasures is He expressing himself.

In the human-samsara too, the powers of our knowledge are busy working, while the powers of our joy are engaged in the creation of delight. In work lies the power of our self-preservation, in pleasure our power of self-expression. Self-preservation is necessary for us, but self-expression is more than the necessary.

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[3] Refers to one of Tagore's songs, "I have been invited," where he speaks of the world's joy-sacrifice, *ananda-yajna.*

[4] Tagore is suggesting that the mysteries of even the material world cannot be fully unraveled or mastered by the intellect; the quest of science will forever be incomplete because no matter how much we know, what remains to be known is still infinite.

Necessity hampers expression and vice versa; the example of war shows us that. Self-interest discourages heedless expenditure but joy expresses itself in prodigality. That is why, in the realm of self-interest such as the office, the lesser we express ourselves, the more respectable we are; on the other hand, the more we forget about our self-interests in a festival of joy, the brighter the celebration becomes.

That is why there is no bar on man's self-expression in literature. Self- interest is far from it. Here, pain pours a cloud of tears upon our hearts, but it does not interfere with our household duties (samsara); fear sways our heart but does not harm our bodies; happiness fills our hearts with the touch of mirth but does not awaken our greed. In this way man has woven alongside his household of necessities a need-free habitation of literature. There he is able to experience his own nature through various *rasas* without harming himself in any practical sense; here he can discover expression unhampered by obstacles. There is no obligation here, only happiness. There are no sentries here, only the emperor himself.

So what is it that we recognize in literature? Man's plenitude, his affluence—that by which he has exceeded his necessities, that which could not be consumed in his household.

This is why in an essay of mine I have said that though every child and man is well acquainted with the pleasures of gastronomy, this has never acquired a status higher than that of farce in literature. Because, the pleasure in eating does not transcend its satiation. After filling our stomachs we reward it with a deep sigh and send it on its way. We do not invite it to the princely gates of literature. But that which cannot be contained in the pots of our store rooms, those pleasures course through the waves of literature with great aplomb. Since man cannot consume them fully in work, he heaves a sigh of relief to be able to express them in literature with all the force of his full heart.

In this plenitude is the befitting expression of man. It is true than man loves to eat but his heroism is truer still. Who will withstand this force of man's truth? Like the Ganga (Bhagirathi), it has demolished rocks, flooded the cloud-elephant (*airavat*), satiated the thirst of villages, cities, and fields, and cascaded into the ocean. Man's heroism has fulfilled all the necessities of his samsara and brimmed over.

In this way whatever is great in man, whatever is constant, whatever is as yet unconsumed in work and errands—all this has been captured in literature and by itself has built man's image of immensity.

There is one more reason [for the value of literature]. In this world, whatever we see, we see in a scattered way; we see it a little here and there, a little now and then; we see it mixed up with ten other things. But in literature those gaps, those adulterations do not exist. There all the light shines upon that which is being expressed. For that time being nothing else is allowed to be seen. Through many contrivances such a place is created that allows only that to be luminous.

That is why one places nothing that cannot withstand such stark individuality and luminosity in the space of literature. Because, to place the undeserving in such a location is to humiliate it. In the many veils of the world the glutton often escapes notice but to place him in the concentrated light of literature is to make

of him an object of derision. Consequently, that expression of humanity which is not insignificant, that which the human heart in its mercy or heroism, wrath or peace, considers without inhibition to be a worthy representation of itself, that which while standing within the girdle of artistic craftsmanship can withstand the continuous stare of eternal time—that is what man naturally places in literature. Otherwise its oddity becomes painful to us. Our hearts rebel to see anyone but the rightful emperor seated on the throne.

But not all men have broadness of feeling or discretion, neither do all societies, and there comes a time when fleeting and small desires diminish man. In that hour of crisis the distorted mirror magnifies the small and in the literature of such a time man augments his pettiness, floods his own shortcomings with audacious light. Then craftiness takes the place of art, pride substitutes glory and Tennyson is replaced by Kipling.

But eternal time (*mahakal*) reigns supreme. He must strain everything. Through his sieve all that is petty and withered slips through and loses itself in the dust, becoming the dust. Through ages and generations of men only that survives wherein all men can perceive themselves. Through this process of careful filtering what remains is man's treasure of all times and all nations.

In such demolishing and re-making of literature the eternal ideal of man's nature and self-expression builds up on its own. That ideal also embodies the hull which guides the literature of a new age. If we judge literature according to that ideal then we have made use of all humanity's powers of discretion.

Now is the time for me to come to the main point—and this is it—to see literature through the mirror of nation, time and people is to diminish it, not see it fully. If we understand that in literature the universal man (*vishva-manav*) expresses himself, then we can perceive what is truly worthy of observing in literature. Where the author has not been simply the pretext of literary composition, his literature has failed. Where the author has experienced in his own being the being of all men, whose writing expresses the pain of every man, that writing has found a place in literature. Thus must one view literature as a temple that the universal man (*vishva-manav*) has built; writers have come from all times and all nations to work as labourers in that project. The plan of the building is not available to us, but whatever is wrong is immediately demolished; every labourer has to use his natural competence to integrate his own composition into the whole and thereby complete the invisible plan. In this is expressed his power and the reason why no one pays him a pittance like an ordinary labourer but respects him like a maestro.

You have called the topic I have been entrusted to discuss as "Comparative Literature" in English. In Bangla I shall call it *Visva Sahitya* (world literature).

What does man say through his work, what is his direction, what is he trying to accomplish? To understand this one needs to follow man's intention through history. The reign of Akbar or Gujarat's history or Elizabeth's character—such piecemeal viewing only satiates our curiosity for information. The one who knows that Akbar and Elizabeth are merely pretexts, who knows man has tried to fulfil his intentions across history through many efforts at realization (*sadhana*), many mistakes, and many corrections, who knows that man is trying in every way to

connect with everyone else in the broadest way in order to free himself, who knows that the individual is struggling to succeed in politics (*rajtantra*) and from politics progress to democracy—man is breaking and re-making himself only to voice himself in the universal, to realize himself in the many—such a person tries to see not the individual but the deeper intention in the striving soul's constant endeavour to transcend his personal history. He does not return after seeing the pilgrims–he looks for the deity that all the pilgrims have congregated to see.

Similarly, how man expresses his joy in literature, how and in what form the human soul chooses to manifest its diverse, variegated, multiple images of self-expression, that is the only thing worth considering in world literature. Literature must actually enter the world–whether it pleases to express itself in the form of the diseased, the accomplished, or the ascetic person–to know how far man can find his kinship in the world, and to what extent he can realize truth. It will not do to know it as an artificial construct; it is a world in itself. Its essence exceeds the individual's grasp. It is in continuous creation, like the material universe itself, but in the innermost core of that unfinished creation is a perfected ideal that remains unmoving.

The substance of the Sun's core is recreating itself in many liquid and solid forms that we cannot see, but the corona of light that surrounds the sun ceaselessly proclaims its existence to the world. Thus it constantly bestows itself and unites itself with everyone. If we could perceive the totality of humanity in a visual metaphor, we would see it as a vision of the Sun. We would see its matter slowly arranging itself in many layers within itself, surrounding itself in a halo of joyful expression, shedding its light in every direction.[5] Regard literature for once as that halo of expression composed in language and enfolding humanity. Here is a tempest of light, the source of radiance, here are clashes of brilliant spray.

Walking through a neighbourhood you notice how busy everybody is: the grocer tending his shop, the blacksmith hammering on the anvil, the labourer carrying his load, the merchant balancing his accounts—what may at first be invisible, you may perceive with your heart—on both sides of the road, in every home, in bazaar and shop, in lanes and by-lanes, how the torrent of *rasa* (relish) floods through so many streams and tributaries, overrunning so much shabbiness, wretchedness, and poverty. The nectar of the universal soul of man is apportioned out among all men through the Ramayan–Mahabharat, tales and fables, *kirtans* and *panchalis*; Ram–Lakshman appear to prop up the most insignificant actions of the pettiest of men; the merciful breeze of Panchavati blows in the darkest home; man's heart-creations and self-expressions enclasp the penury and stringency of the workplace of the labouring man, with arms bejewelled with bracelets of beauty and beneficence. For once we need to see literature as embracing all of humanity. We have to see that in his emotional self man has expanded his practical being

[5] Rabi, the poet's own name, means sun; in several of his poems, Tagore uses the metaphor of the sun to represent himself and his creativity. It is not unlikely that a similar self-referentiality is subtly in operation here.

so far in manifold and multi-directional ways. The monsoons that bless him are composed of so many rains of songs and showers of poetry, so many *Meghdutams*, so many Vidyapatis; the pains and joys of his small home have been augmented with the tales of the pains and joys of so many great monarchs of the solar and lunar dynasties! How the humblest man engirds the pains of his daughter with the consummate compassion of Princess Parvati, daughter of the King of the mountains; how in the glory of Kailasha's poverty-stricken Lord, he glorifies the pain of his own poverty! In this way man advances, surpassing himself, intensifying himself, burnishing himself with a halo of brightness as he struggles on. Though sorely straightened by his circumstances, man has created for himself an augmented thought-creation, a second *samsara* (universe) of literary composition that surrounds this worldly *samsara.*

Do not so much as imagine that I will show you the way to such a world literature. Each of us must make his way forward according to his own means and abilities. All I have wanted to say is that just as the world is not merely the sum of your plough field, plus my plough field, plus his plough field–because to know the world that way is only to know it with a yokel–like parochialism–similarly world literature is not merely the sum of your writings, plus my writing, plus his writings. We generally see literature in this limited, provincial manner. To free oneself of that regional narrowness and resolve to see the universal being in world literature, to apprehend such totality in every writer's work, and to see its interconnectedness with every man's attempt at self-expression–that is the objective we need to pledge ourselves to.

—Translated by Rijula Das and Makarand R. Paranjape